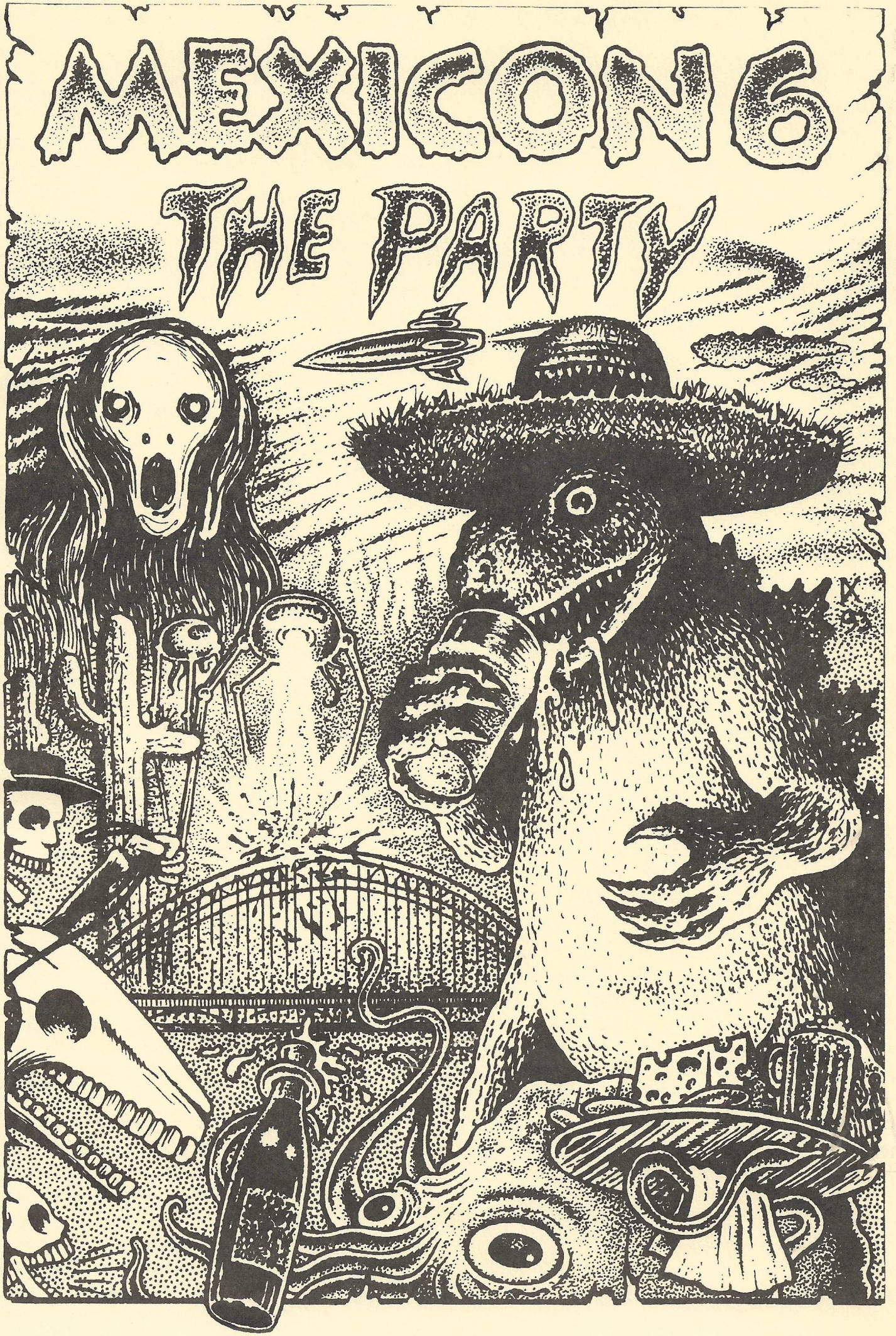
MEXICON 6
THE PARTY

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Editorial

Mexicon 6 is a celebration. A celebration of Mexicon's first decade. And irrespective of what lies ahead, it is a decade which has largely accomplished what it set out to do: providing a forum devoted centrally and essentially to the written form of Science Fiction.

In keeping with the theme of the convention, this book offers a look back at the whole history of Mexicon. In it, you will find contributions from previous guests, reviews of the decade from writers, critics and fans, and artwork from all the Mexicon programme books.

We are particularly happy to be able to feature no less than six of our previous guests, from Alasdair Gray (Mexicon 1) to Ian McDonald and Norman Spinrad (Mexicon 5). Their pieces range from fiction through drama to diaries, and will we hope provide a reminder of the quality and range of writers that Mexicon has featured.

Amongst the critical work, you will find a range of views and memories. Some are more optimistic than others; some believe that the genre is losing its edge and ceasing to challenge. For myself, I think the situation is much as it has always been: a lot of rubbish with a few gems for those willing to look for them. This year's Clarke awards nominees surely testify to the continuing quality of the best work. And some fears have not come to pass. A few years ago the 'decline of the midlist' was the source of great sorrow and gnashing of teeth; today more books are published than ever, and the cost reductions flowing from the advance of technology are enabling a new generation of publishers such as Ringpull to rise and battle the conglomerates.

To those who believe the genre is becoming less distinct, more blurred, I would say that this is a reflection of a change occurring in society. Over the last ten years, computers and networks have become ubiquitous, and information in general has swept over us like a tidal wave. As we struggle to survive the chaotic inputs we receive, each individual applies a unique filter to this information, taking from it what they can or will. With so many facts and opinions thrown at us, our level of shared experience is continually reduced, our sense of cosy community undermined.

Whether we can survive these changes, or whether we will ultimately drown in our own information, noone can say. As John Clute says in his piece, the most immediate thing to say is perhaps the simplest: that most of us are (at the moment at least) still here.

A Brief History of Mexicon

The Origins of Mexicon

by Linda Krawecke - reprinted from the Tynecon II Programme Book

So why is a convention situated smack dab in the middle of Geordie-Land called MEXICON? Is it really because Newcastle is twin-city to Tiajuana? Or because folks in the Highlands like to sing 'South of the Border down Newcastle Way'? Or because enchiladas go well with Newcastle Brown? The real answer lies in a situation that arose at CHANNELCON in Brighton during Easter of '82. Maybe you remember it as I do, especially those lull periods when the bars were shut and there seemed nothing better to do than sit around and mutter half-hearted complaints. That particular afternoon a committed group of us were seated near the bar in case by some freak circumstances it should open early, muttering away and airing our favourite gripes while watching as barbarian hordes and Logan's Runners ambled by. The muttering had to do with the changing nature of Eastercons (cross reference see: *Rob Hansen's Guide to Fannish Complaints* number 37). This rapidly ageing gripe was about how the mass popularity of Science Fiction had broadened the definition of what was once primarily a written medium to include films, television, comics, computers, costumes, war games, and Star Trek porno. The conclusion was that written SF, both as literature and as a basis for fanzine culture, is now a fringe itself in the wider field of what is now known as 'Sci-Fi'. It's a sad day to discover your star is no longer the only one shining in the universe, so we griped and waited for the bar to open.

'What we really need,' someone began, 'is a special special interest group. Something truly fringe that we can claim to belong to and demand that the next Eastercon cater for us.' 'Yeah, but like what?' 'Like Mexican fandom,' Abi Frost threw at us. We all turned to stare at her. 'You mean there is such a thing?,' Gregory asked. 'Oh, surely there must be somewhere... Mexican fans running around doing Mexicanly fannish type things. I don't see why Mexican fans should be neglected just because they're a small special interest group.'

Things blossomed from there. We would become Mexican fandom and demand bilingual programme books and programmes catering to Mexican fans. We'd want siestas scheduled for the afternoons as well as tequila on demand and tacos served at the banquet. Our plans grew wild. Chris Evans suggested we all wear sombreros with 'Kees me Queek' badges on them as inspired by the 'souvenir of Brighton' hats he'd seen earlier that day. Greg suggested that we all wear tight black trousers with silver-spangled stripes running down the seams, and Harry Bell suggested bandeleros. Without realising it we had slipped into using a Hollywood style pseudo-Mexican accent and each new suggestion was greeted by many 'arriba's and 'si si's. 'And we'll request that we have our very own Mexican badges,' someone threw in, to which the unanimous reply was: 'BADGES? We don' need no steenkin' badges!' (cross reference see: *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*). By this time the bar had opened at last and we all grabbed a drink to toast our identity as a fringe group: Mexican fandom... ...the kind who read SF and fanzines. Spontaneously we broke into Mexican-like song, 'aye yi yi yi ...'. It was the only Mexican song we knew and even then we didn't know the rest of it so we just kept singing the same phrase over and over again: 'aye yi yi yi ... aye yi yi yi ...'. Mexican fandom was born.

The Mexicon Charter

The Mexicon charter was published in the Tynecon II programme book, and repeated at intervals ever since. After ten years and six conventions, it is still the best summary of what Mexicon stands for.

1) Mexicon is a specialist convention dealing centrally with the written form of Science Fiction, and deliberately shuns fringe elements by not catering for them.

2) Any explorations around this theme, must derive from it and reflect it.

3) The planned events should be tailored to fit into a Linear Programme, which aims to involve as many of the attendees as possible.

4) It should, as far as possible, examine the active issues and controversies of the day as they relate to SF.

5) It should strive to keep registration and hotel costs as low as possible.

6) Where it does not contravene 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 above, Mexicon should endeavour to try to not take itself too seriously!

7) Charter? We don' wan no steenkin' charter!

A Mexicon Decade

As the Charter shows, Mexicon had two aspects from the very beginning. There was the fun and the sombreros, and the consumption of vast quantities of Sol and Corona. And then there was the commitment to written Science Fiction. As Kev Williams said in the Tynecon programme book, 'Mexicon will seek to explore SF as a serious form of literature; to examine the ever more diffuse interface between SF and so-called "mainstream" literature.'

Over the last decade, Mexicon has come a long way. Some things may have been lost along the way - but it's hard to be a radical fringe element when 300 people turn up to your convention! At the same time, we can be proud of our achievements. We have featured British writers not normally seen within the SF community, from Alasdair Gray to Iain Sinclair, and overseas writers from William Gibson to Pat Cadigan and Norman Spinrad. We have developed a strong tradition for performance, from Geoff Ryman via USEXCO to John Joyce and Ken Campbell. And we continue to reach for new ideas: the first Mexicon lecture, delivered by Tom Shippey at Mexicon 5; our audio convention record which is being handed over to the Science Fiction Foundation library; and the special issue of *Nexus* for Mexicon 4.

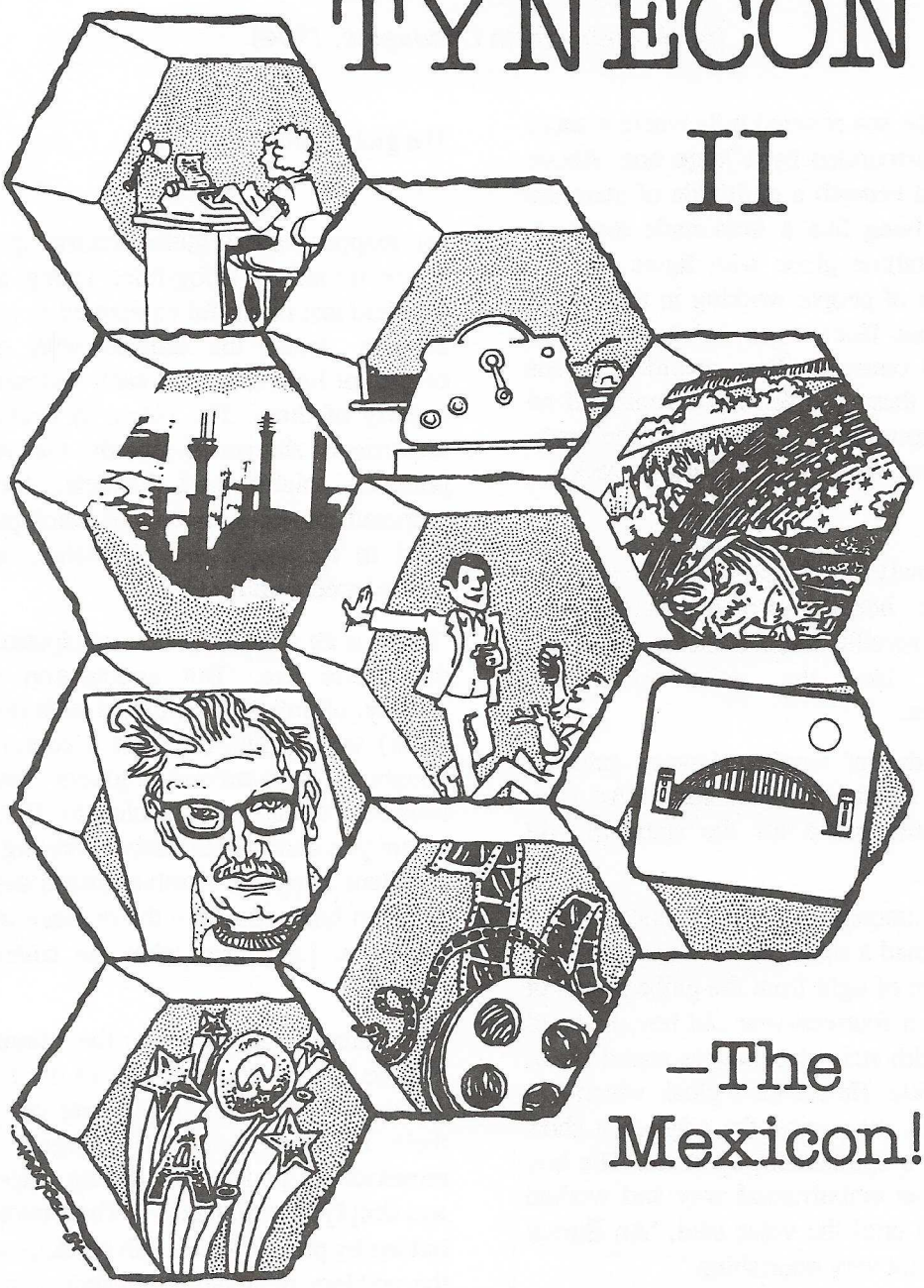
Beyond these achievements, I would like to think that Mexicon has changed the way other conventions think about programming; perhaps only a little, but enough. Mexicon's armchairs and coffee tables are now passé; and more than a few conrunners talk about having a 'Mexicon-like' stream at the heart of their own programme. If we have reminded people that SF is ultimately about the written word, then we can be satisfied.

So where do we go now? In one sense Mexicon has served its purpose, showing that an audience exists for a Science Fiction Convention where the emphasis is on 'Science Fiction' rather than 'Convention'. The barbarians have been beaten back from the gate... but in another sense the continued success of Mexicon has only confirmed that the demand for an intelligent, literary convention will remain as long as writers write good books and readers want to read them. Whether or not Mexicon continues as Mexicon, I for one want a convention like that to go to.

Mexicon 1

Royal Station Hotel
Newcastle-Upon-Tyne
25-28 May 1984

TYNECON II



—The Mexicon!

Featured Guests - Alasdair Gray, Russell Hoban

Committee - Kev Williams (Chair), Sue Williams, Sue Hepple, Harry Bell, John Jarrold, Chris Evans, Paul Kincaid, Abi Frost, Greg & Linda Pickersgill, Rob Hansen, Ian Williams, Arnold Akien, Neil Hepple, Neil Thompson

In the Public Eye

by Alasdair Gray

The first part of a science fiction novel

THE HISTORY MAKER

(forthcoming from Canongate, 1994)

Mist from the sea covered hills where a small army lay surrounded by a large one. Above the mist and beneath a multitude of stars the public eye hung like a man-made moon. It was a crystalline globe with lights and the appearances of people working in the centre, people whose faces expanded hugely when they looked outward. They recorded visions and noises, these people, and commented on them, but now the only noise was the hush-hushing of remote waves breaking on rocks.

The mist slowly brightened where the sun was nearing the horizon. Bugles from below sounded a reveille, then came faint steady scratchings like the noise of many grasshoppers.

'The third day of warfare dawns,' said the public eye sinking into the mist. 'An hour from now the battle for the standard will begin.'

It paused among shadowy figures whose activity seemed a source of the scratchings. A sudden beam of light from the globe lit one of the figures: a fourteen-year-old boy, haggard and dirty with stained bandages round brow, arm and ankle. He sat on a cloak which had been his bed sharpening the edge of a short sword with a spindle-shaped stone. The boy blushed in an embarrassed way and worked doggedly on until the voice said, 'An Ettrick breakfast – not very nourishing.'

Then the boy struck at the eye with the stone and toppled forward on his face.

'A typical reaction,' said the eye, skipping sideways and leaving him in darkness, 'From a member of a hot-headed clan on the verge of extinction. Let us see how the Northumbrians are faring.'

The globe vanished

* * * * * *

and reappeared in a globe floating up a slope on the far side of a fog-filled valley. Soldiers here had lost no useful equipment or supplies. Burners dotted the hillside with cheerful centres of light and heat, each surrounded by a party of three. The oldest in every group unhurriedly sharpened swords, the youngest polished shields and helmets, the third prepared breakfast. Scents of black puddings fried in their own fat circulated, and hot coffee laced with rum.

'There is an atmosphere of anticipation,' said the public eye, 'But anticipation without anxiety, of anticipation tinged with (let us be frank) satisfaction. For half a century these doughty Northumbrian fighters have lost brothers, fathers and uncles to Ettrick, so where you and I see the only surviving clan of a gallant army the Northumbrians see – and who can blame them? – the remnant of a nest of vipers. Let's hear what the commanders say.'

Five commanders stood on the summit, side by side but far enough apart to offer distinct views of themselves. They were old men in their middle thirties with small clipped moustaches, patient, far-seeing expressions and deeply scarred faces. * Their bodies were hidden by plain ankle-length cloaks, each with the emblem of a Northumbrian clan on the left shoulder: the oak of the Priestleys, the

---

* Medals were now as obsolete as governments which awarded them. Since scars had become the only outward sign of a soldier's courage senior officers rejected medical treatment which would heal their faces.

anvil of the Smiths, the Lambton worm, Arkwright spool, Grimes shovel. They waited in silence while a dawn breeze shredded the mist behind them and uncovered five shining steel poles thirty feet high, each topped with a golden eagle gripping a cross beam. From each beam hung a banner whose slow flappings did not hide the clan emblem on it and the names of past victories. The public eye chose this moment to approach swiftly from a distance.

It paused at eye level before the central commander and said, 'How will the battle go today, General Lambton?'

Lambton looked at the air over it and spoke as if to himself.

'We'll crush them flat. They've no food, no water, we outnumber them ten to one. We'll have their standard thirty minutes after starting bell.'

'You have lost a lot to Ettrick,' said the eye, spinning round Lambton's head to show the wrinkled flesh and small holes where nose and ears had been.

'More than you see,' he replied with a slight smile, 'A dad, nine brothers, seven sons, five hands and three legs I've lost. No, nature never meant me for a swordsman. A commander is all I'm fit for now and I've never regretted it more than today. I would have loved a final chop at Jardine Craig Douglas and his brats.'

'How do you think General Craig Douglas managed his campaign, General Lambton?'

'Like a professional. His choice of ground might have led to a draw if Teviot and Liddesdale, Eskdale and Galawater had moved as fast as he moved Ettrick. But they couldn't, so we've got their standards.'

(Here General Arkwright gave a loud guffaw which Lambton ignored.)

'What puzzles me,' said Lambton, 'Is why he should make his last stand *there*.'

He pointed across the moor which was now quite clear of mist. The Ettrick standard stood on the summit of a single hill with the remains of the Ettrick army on it and the camps of their enemies on every surrounding slope.

'If Craig Douglas won't surrender – if he's determined to die for his flag – he could have found a better den to die in than a waterless hill where we can come at him from every side.'

'Will you invite him to surrender, General Lambton?'

The commander-in-chief pushed out his under lip and sucked his moustache, sighed and said, 'We'll vote on it. Priestley?'

'He had his last chance yesterday as far as I'm concerned.'

'Give him another chance to climb down,' said Smith and Grimes agreed with him.

'Ok, give Craig Douglas a last chance to surrender,' said Arkwright with another sharp guffaw, 'He won't take it.'

'If that's what you think Arkwright, give him the message yourself,' said Lambton, grinning, 'Tell him he and his men have fought nobly and well, pile it on as thick as you like and don't forget the bit about their aunts.'

Arkwright nodded, saluted and walked off down the slope, the public eye accompanying him on one side and a herald with a flag of truce on the other.

* * * * * *

Wat Dryhope lay flat on his back near the top of the besieged hill and stared up at the black speck of a lark vibrating tunefully in a blue space between shreds of cloud. He sighed and said, 'I wish I was a singer.'

'You are a skilful blade,' said his brother Joe, who knelt beside him honing a sword, 'And nothing else. You saved the standard for us yesterday. The Dad said so.'

'Is it my weapon you're grinding?'

'Yes, why no? I've seen to mine.'

'Fine edges won't help us today,' said Wat, yawning.

'No, but the sky is clearing and they'll catch the sun. We'll so glitter in the clash that all

the bairns will cheer and the aunties laugh through their sobs. Now THAT,' said Joe, pausing to test the blade with his thumb, 'Strikes me as a *respectable* end.'

The brothers were middle-aged men of twenty though Joe was ten months older. Like all soldiers in these armies they wore knee-length sleeveless vests of flexible metal strong enough to withstand the edge of a sword but not a straight thrust with the point. Over these were the hooded cloaks in which they had passed the night. Shields and helmets of a Roman pattern lay on the turf nearby. After slipping his brother's sword back in its scabbard Joe produced a rag and started polishing the helmets. Each had the Ettrick pine tree stencilled on it and digits indicating (for the benefit of the public eye) the wearer's identity and lineage. As Joe rubbed he whistled softly to himself, his usual expression of casual amusement not obscured by the bloody bandage which circled his head at an angle covering the left eye. Wat suddenly sat up. A small aircraft was settling onto the turf of the valley below, its side stencilled with a large eye inside a circle. A shutter on top opened. Four bubbles floated out and drifted in different directions.

'Joe,' said Wat, smiling strangely, 'The media!'

'Well?' said Joe.

'What if I sneak into that and take control? It's probably unmanned but if there's a pilot I'll stun him. Nobody need find out before the starting bell, then I'll take it to the summit and fly into the thick of the enemy three feet above the ground! The Northumbrians will need to flatten themselves or jump away and all the time Ettrick can come charging behind chopping them!'

'You're a great joker!' said Joe abruptly.

'Do you *never* imagine doing things like that?' asked Wat, looking at him.

'When we were weans among the women I played with toy daggers and pop guns and laser cannons like wee lads everywhere. I even remember us bombing sister Kate's doll's house with fireworks, though that idea was entirely yours. Bairns can play at anything. Normal lads forget those ploys when they learn to fight like men. Wheesht!'

The public eye had appeared between them. With casual ease Joe stood up, tightened his belt, slid his sword into the scabbard.

'Joe Dryhope, General Jardine Craig Douglas's eldest surviving son,' said a face looking out of the eye, 'How will the battle go today, Joe?'

'Don't worry, we'll give you a good show,' said Joe looking at the sky, 'The dad has a dodge up his sleeve.'

'Will it help your chance of survival?'

'Wait and see.'

'Have you a message for anyone, Joe?'

'I said my goodbyes to the Dryhope family when I left home,' said Joe easily, 'And I need not tell the Cappercleuch and Bowerhope and Mount Benger girls that they're fine bonny women. They know it, so I wish them long happy lives with many more lovers like me.'

'Wat Dryhope!' said the eye and sank to the ground, for Wat was lying flat again, 'Another son of Jardine Craig Douglas. Have you a message for anyone, Wat?'

'I've a message for everyone,' said Wat whose eyes were shut, 'Stop thinking. Thinking rots the brain.'

The public eye became an empty bubble and drifted elsewhere.

'That kind of talk would get you forgotten if you werenae a good action man,' said Joe reproachfully, 'I'm surprised you had no kind words for Nan.'

A trumpet sounded somewhere below them. They looked and saw two tiny approaching figures, one of them bearing a flag of truce.

Survivors

by John Clute

Twenty years after the Beatles' first lp, it still seemed to be England. It was 1984. We drove north from London to Newcastle in the spring, through squalor and vista, blessed plot and tesco scar, to the first Mexicon. Just beyond the filth of the road, to which we were contributing our own fumes, hedgerows could still be seen (they are gone now), giving fingerprint and a sense of time's abyss to the land, giving niche to the uncountable complexities of life upon the thin skin of a planet (but already the uncountable, like society itself, had been deemed not to exist; and now the Motorways lip a terminal beach). What we drove through still bore the face of inscape that British writers of science fiction had portrayed as an Ultimate Island. Or so Nicholas Ruddick would suggest, in *Ultimate Island: On the Nature of British Science Fiction* (1993), a study which could, (despite its publication date) have been written a decade earlier and sent to press unchanged; unchanged certainly, by any hint that the quickness we thought we detected in 1984, and have to, was anything but a carrion glow.

It is, indeed, a very strange book (I'll be reviewing it in a future issue of *Foundation*, and won't try to anticipate conclusions not fully reached yet), mixing sharp insights about authors whose work fits his model, along with a fairly remarkable capacity to disparage or disappear writers whose presence might complexify his argument that British sf is best defined as a series of 'works that derive their strength from the motif of the Island, frequently presented in an arena in which catastrophe is played out according to Darwinian rules.' Since that arena is pretty ineffective when it comes to dealing with contemporary writers, and since he is clearly by nature a controversialist, Ruddick deals with writers like Iain Banks in terms which would seem air-brained if it weren't for the high visibility of the knives of Procrustes. About Banks (and Ian McDonald, who make an exceedingly odd couple, especially given the absence of any mention anywhere of Stephen Baxter or Mary Gentle or Gwyneth Jones or Paul J McAuley or Geoff Ryman or Brian Stableford as a writer of fiction, or, or), this is what he says: 'That two younger writers who are both in different ways extremely accomplished stylists... periodically produce the kinds of quasi-baroque space opera to which the label science fiction in the 1990s has largely been reduced seems to indicate only that they ought to be exercising their talents more profitably.' As an analysis of Banks's Culture novels – which very profitably argue an encompassingly black vision of homo sapiens, cinderblock islands and all – this sort of stuff is about as enticing, though certainly its syntax is more complex, as a flameout on e-mail.

In 1984 (it seems to me) we thought that British sf was beginning to be created by survivors, live mammals learning how to digest the ruins. We thought that the two significant sf texts by the first two Mexicon guests-of-honour both showed savvy about the old world, and grasped the new. (Neither Alasdair Gray, author of *Lanark* (1981), or Russell Hoban, author of *Riddley Walker* (1980), are mentioned in the Ruddick text.) We thought (I certainly thought) that the magazine *Interzone* might well serve as a (deceivingly low profile) forum or arena where writers new and old might go about their business, which it has indeed managed to do for a period much longer than that enjoyed by *New Worlds* in its Moorcock prime (*Interzone* is unmentioned by Ruddick, and the author of *Mother London* is described as one of those authors who 'raise themselves from hackery halfway to literature'). In 1984, we thought we were climbing out of the basement into patches of sunlight in the city, and at least some of us thought that it was about time for some gallows-humour, time to do some orienteering after the long sunset. It may be that we had no real idea of how deeply lassitudinous the land had become, how profoundly divorced from surf and tide, how little the gaiety would count against the

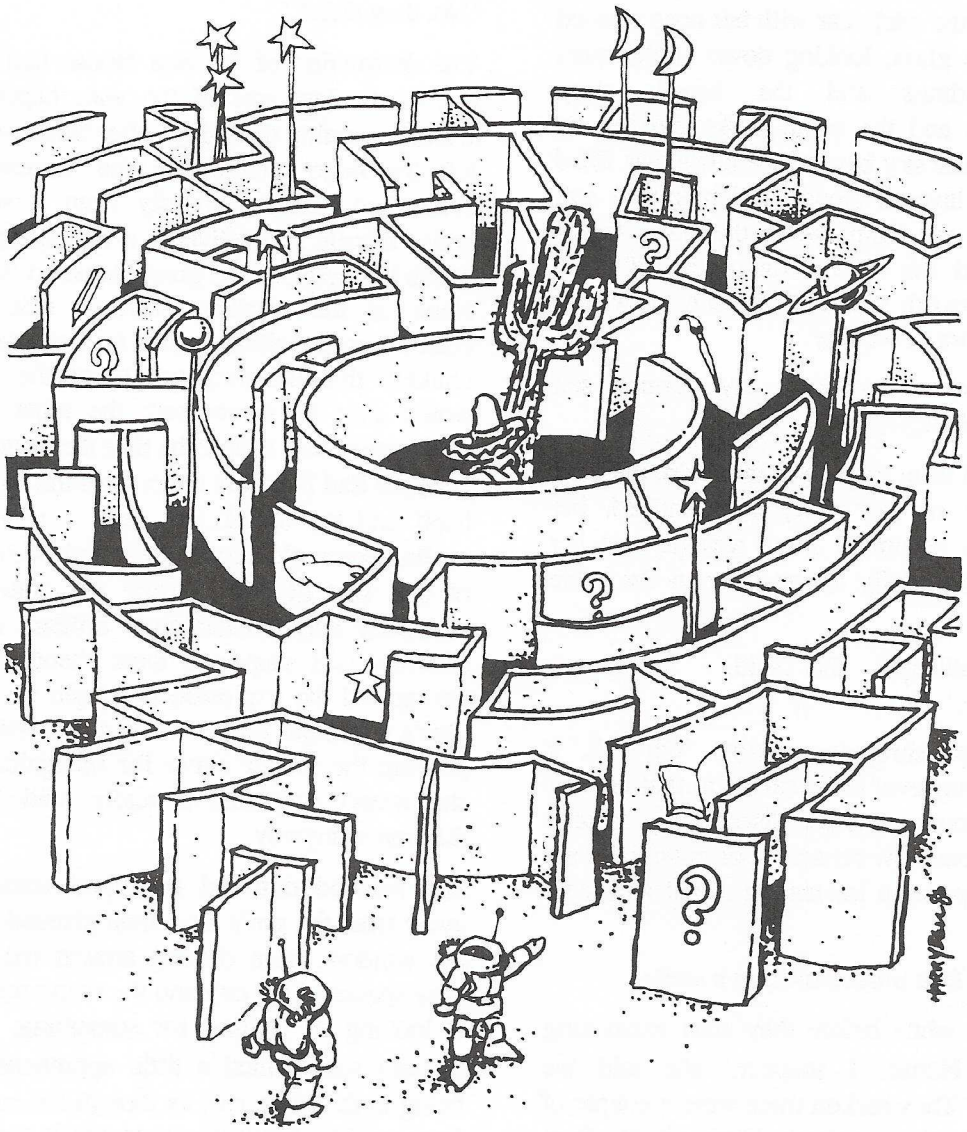
golems; but it is surely the case that writers like Banks, or like Colin Greenland – like in fact most of the writers Ruddick cannot take into the bed with him – began to play with the genre recursively or blindsiding into the 'future'.

I do remember the hotel in Newcastle, hulking like a Victorian dinosaur out of John Martin over the train tracks and the station. I remember hobbling back and forth through the corridors (I'd had an accident, and was still on canes) in a fever of anticipations, because there was a smell of surviving in the air, and I didn't want the door to shut before I got up the staircase. After all, as a North American, I'd had my fill of belatedness: I'd come to England not only for the past, which was being destroyed around me before I had a chance to memorize the coinage, but to enter the present tense of life as reader critic, writer, member of the folk. There remains a great deal to say about the ten years since. Perhaps the most immediate thing to say at this point is the simplest: That most of us are still here.

Mexicon 2

Royal Angus Hotel
Birmingham
7-9 February 1986

MEXICON 2



Featured Guests - Iain Banks, William Gibson, Jan Mark

Committee - Linda Pickersgill (Chair), Greg Pickersgill, Colin Greenland, Paul Kincaid, Pam Wells, Rob Jackson, Lilian Edwards, Christina Lake, Abi Frost, Anne Page, Maureen Porter

Against A Dark Background

by Iain M Banks

Epilogue

The cable car swung gently as it rose through the mists towards the long summit of the cliff. She put out her hand and moved her fingers through the golden curls of the child's hair. The girl pretended not to notice. She knelt on the seat of the cable car with her nose pressed against the glass, looking down at the quiet grey buildings and the broad, steep boulevards and the small parks passing by beneath. The sky beyond the cliffs was filled with pale layered clouds which looked soft and clean and calm, while the mists below and behind the slowly rising car afforded hazy patchwork views of the canals, wharfs and harbours of the city.

'You think it unlikely my former self survived, then.'

She turned from looking at the child, the wide smile still on her face, then nodded, her expression becoming more serious and her gaze falling briefly to the floor of the cable car.

'Very unlikely,' she said. 'But not impossible.'

Feril made a shrugging motion. 'Oh well,' it said. 'If they ever do excavate to that level of the Sea House ruins and discover my original self still somehow conscious or potentially so, it should pose an interesting moral and legal question.'

Its plastic face moved to form a smile.

'It'll be a while before they start excavating the Sea House, I suspect,' she told the android. 'They reckon there were a couple of reactors in there nobody knew about; from the radiation signature of the leaks they're very old and very dirty and their containment's been breached; it's only the wreckage that's keeping it more-or-less sealed.'

'Did they ever discover who attacked the building?'

She shook her head, glancing at the child again and folding her arms. 'No,' she said. 'No, they didn't.'

The destruction of the Sea House had been one of the last acts of the war, happening without warning three days after Sharrow had left the huge building in the monowheel. What had almost certainly been a stealth cruise missile had delivered a fusion airburst which had reduced the great House to rubble. None of the conflict's various sides has claimed responsibility and it was thought unlikely that the perpetrators of the strike would ever be discovered; the most likely explanation was held to be that the target had been the Sad Brothers rather than the building itself and the attack had been a rival cult settling some old score; there had been a lot of that sort of thing during the brief war, especially between the more militant faiths. Sharrow still suspected these theories were wrong and the explosion had been the Lazy Gun's work, but there was no easy method of proving the matter either for or against and she wasn't sure that it really made much difference anyway.

She reached out and smoothed some hair away from the girl's face, then glanced out of the window, gaze darting around the silent grey spaces of the city and the rising mists, as if looking or waiting for something. Feril thought she seemed a little apprehensive at being in the cable car, as though she suffered from vertigo, but it was not sure; it could not recall her being so afflicted in the past and wondered why she seemed so concerned now. Feril could feel the act of wondering trigger a memory search; it allowed the routine to continue and it quickly found the most likely reason for the lady's distress.

Of course.

Feril felt itself experience what it thought of as an internalised smile, combined with an odd, mixed sensation of concern and a kind of respect, perhaps even admiration.

The woman who had been the lady Sharrow was dressed in old-fashioned but finely-made clothes and she looked well, if rather older than Feril would have expected, remembering her from her first visit to Vembyr, two years earlier. There was a hint of what people called grey hair at her temples and her face looked more worn and lined and somehow softer. Her hands looked different too, it thought; the skin there appeared harder, as though whatever she did now, it involved working with her hands.

She had yet another new name now, and Feril supposed that in a sense the lady Sharrow really had died, somewhere between Molgarin's Keep - where the Huhsz had discovered what they'd assumed was her body - and the Sea House, where this slim, aging but still strong-looking woman had left so much of her past buried and renounced.

It experienced a degree of regret that she should reappear so unexpectedly - and so delightfully - after its resurrection, only to give it another cause to mourn the passing of the old world... but it was a small degree of regret, and it chided itself for such self-pity. How many people had so much more to mourn! This four-year old kneeling on the seat of the cable car, staring intently out at the mists and architecture of the city, was just one of half a million orphans Golter's latest spasm of self-abuse had produced. The signs that something good had come out of the Decamillenial War were still encouraging, but the correction had been severe, and any gain in social equality, any lessening in civilisational tension, had been bought at the expense of millions of personal catastrophes.

It itself had done well out of the fall of the Court and the subsequent, less legally rigid re-ordering that had resulted; it had been resurrected decades before it might otherwise have expected to be called back into independent existence. And now - thanks to this woman sitting here, poised, alert (and nervous though trying not to show it), smiling lovingly at the little girl kneeling on the seat - now it knew that its previous self had behaved with bravery, resource and honour, and had - assuming that it had died, as it supposed one must - died well.

A kind of glow spread through Feril's consciousness as it contemplated the value of the gift this woman had brought it, just by telling the story of that doomed journey to the fjord, the tower, the Keep and the House.

It watched her watching her adopted child and thought – if it was not itself being overly sentimental now – that it detected in her outgoing care a kind of wary, protective joy, as though the continual act of observance was itself a source of some inestimable satisfaction, and – again, always assuming it was not suffering an attack of excessively romantic emotionalism – thought that it identified in itself a similar concern for her; a realisation that came accompanied with the sadness of knowing it might never see her or her daughter again.

It looked up to the cliff-top cable-station as the car slowed, approaching its destination.

She stood, taking up a shoulder-bag from the seat and smoothing her skirt as the car rumbled into the concrete space of the ancient building. Feril stood too, smiling at the little girl as she bounced off the seat and took her mother's hand; the doors opened to the empty hall and they stepped out.

The little girl skipped along the floor as they walked towards the exit, swinging this way and that on her mother's arm. 'That was good! That was good! Mummy, can we do it again? Please can we? Please?'

'Not just now, my love. Perhaps some other time. Maybe we can come back, for a short while.'

She looked up at Feril as she said this, with what might have been regret. It smiled too, then looked away.

Outside, the parking space set amongst the trees of the cliff-top gardens was empty save for the little three-wheel car she had arrived in. People called them Austerity Wagons. Feril thought about the steam-driven

automobile it had recently started rebuilding for the second time, the one wrecked when the apartment block (which it was also restoring again) had been blown up and tumbled into the street. It felt a little guilty about focusing its abilities on the past rather than on the reconstruction that the humans were presently so busily engaged in, but it felt a kind of pride as well, and besides knew that the reorganization was something they had to do for themselves, for a variety of reasons.

She opened the small car and fussed over the child as she strapped her in, then turned, flicking some of her dark brown hair away from her face. She smiled. Feril thought she looked slightly embarrassed.

'It occurs to me,' she said, 'that you know why I wanted to come up in the cable car.'

It nodded. 'I believe I know,' it said, glancing in at the child, sitting in the rear seat of the little car and playing with a toy. 'And I understand.'

Feril hesitated, while she looked down at the car-park surface, and then it added, 'I noticed that you no longer limp.'

She laughed gently. 'I had that seen to. Something I should have done years ago.' She shrugged, diffident again. 'One learns.' She put her hand out. It took it.

'It was good to see you again,' it said. 'And; thank you.'

Another shrug. 'I owed you.'

'Then it is mutual. If I can ever be of help, to you or yours; do not hesitate to contact me. I mean this.'

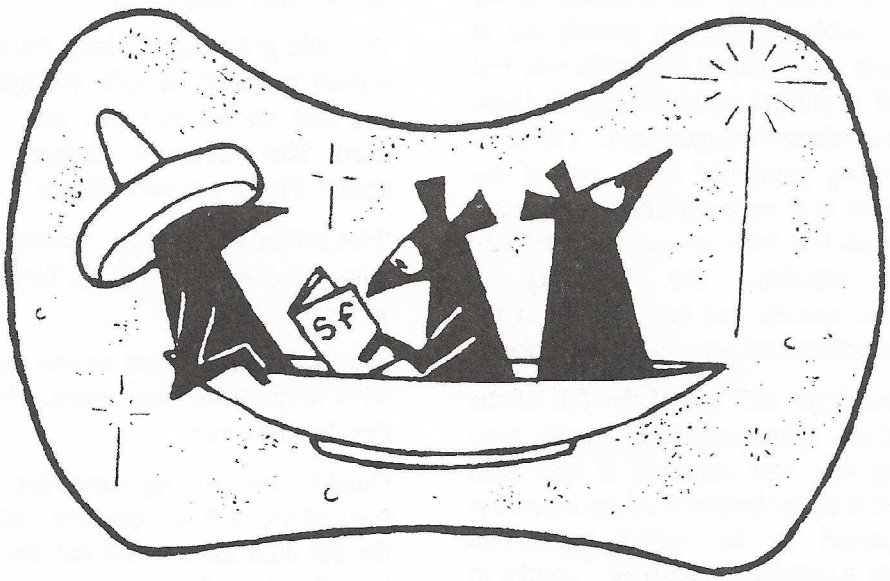
'Thanks. Maybe one day.' She looked round the trees and lawns of the half-neglected gardens. The air was cool and sharp and a freshening breeze was blowing, sweeping the mists away from the edge of the cliff and slowly sending them back down into the city and out towards the bay and the sea beyond.

Feril shook her hand and then bowed. 'Farewell,' it said.

She gave another small laugh and came forward, rising on the toes of her boots and kissing the android on its cheek. 'You take care,' she said.

It wore an expression of delighted surprise on its face for the time it took for her to get into the car, start it and drive off down the road, one hand waving from a window and the little girl twisting round in her seat and staring back through the rear screen and waving too.

Then it shook itself and – still with a smile on its face – started back to the cable car station, to return to the city, where, as ever, there was work to be done.



Mexicon 3

Albany Hotel
Nottingham
26-29 May 1989

Featured Guests - Algis Budrys, Jonathon Carroll, Sydney Jordan

Committee - Greg Pickersgill (Chair), Linda Pickersgill, Martin Tudor, Paul Kincaid, Mike Christie, Sherry Coldsmith, Maureen Porter, Nic Farey, Mike Dickinson, Tony Berry

Losing the Edge

by Paul Kincaid

On Saturday 12th February 1994 the *Independent* reviewed three novels. One, a thriller by James Dickey, was dismissed as old-fashioned and needn't detain us. The other two were *The Fermata* by Nicholson Baker, in which the central character can freeze time, and *The First Century After Beatrice* by Amin Maalouf, which explores the near-future, when the ability to choose the sex of your child creates social upheaval throughout the third world, where only boys are born. The thing to notice is that both these books use science fiction devices as their central metaphor, though you would never realise this from the reviews.

A week later, on Friday 18th February, Robert Winder, literary Editor of the *Independent*, reviewed *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* edited by Ursula K Le Guin and Brian Attebury. He comments on the 'snob-literary reflex by which all the science fiction that anyone likes is classified as serious literature and sent to a plusher part of the bookshop.' But he still delivers a review equivocal enough to make the unwary reader wonder if he isn't saying: this isn't very good so it must be science fiction.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?

Well, not quite.

In the ten years since the first Mexicon not a lot has changed within science fiction. Cyberpunk came and went, but its major impact had already been achieved before this arbitrary decade began. Indeed, to look at the critics one might be forgiven for thinking there has only ever been one cyberpunk novel, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which predated Mexicon by a year.

The action in these last ten years has all been around or beyond the edge of science fiction, in that hazy region of the mainstream just outside the genre. This isn't something altogether new, within English literature writers such as Huxley and Orwell have regularly flirted with the notions of science fiction. When the first Mexicon invited Alasdair Gray and Russell Hoban to be guests we were recognising the fact that in *Lanark* and *Riddley Walker* they both took the artifice and artefacts of science fiction as a way of providing fresh and challenging perspectives.

Nevertheless, in the decade since then the trickle of 'mainstream' writrers who have followed this path has become a flood. Playing games with time, looking into the future, monsters and machines and magic, Salman Rushdie's telepaths and Ann Billson's vampires, all the familiar sf toys have become such a commonplace in fiction that they are hardly worth commenting on. Writers as varied as Ian McEwan, P.D. James and Julian Barnes in this country, Paul Auster, Donald Barthelme and Margaret Atwood across the Atlantic, have recognised the value, the fictional impact, of a shift in perspective. Even writers who have been publicly dismissive of the genre, like Fay Weldon, have still ransacked its ideas and devices.

The games they play with our toys are not always fresh when seen from within science fiction. Martin Amis might have benefited by reading up on Philip K. Dick and Brian Aldiss before he gave us a life lived backwards in *Time's Arrow*. If he had thought through his reverse scenario more carefully he might have been able to avoid the novel's basic flaw, for the observer carried backwards through time has a fully-formed set of moral judgements but does not have the wit to set those judgements, or the actions of his host, within the content of the society he witnesses. If all the doctors in the hospital take whole people, mangle them upon an operating table, and send them away to the site of an accident, why should it be thought morally wrong for the narrator's host to do this? Robert Winder speaks of the 'remoteness' of science fiction, but it seems to me that Amis is more remote than most science fiction writers because he has divorced his shift in perspective from any society or world which may encompass it. (At

least Amis saw the value of the science fictional device as a tool to tackle major issues and moral quandaries, as opposed to Nicholson Baker who plays with time for no more challenging a purpose than masturbatory fantasy.)

George Santayana said that those who were ignorant of history were doomed to repeat it, and those mainstream writers who have not spent a lifetime immersed in science fiction are missing out on what others have already achieved within the genre. Like Martin Amis reinventing the wheel that Dick and Aldiss had developed, it can lead to naïveté and clumsiness, but it can also lead to new thinking about the uses and possibilities of the device. After all, from another point of view we have already seen science fiction writers of the New Wave reinventing the wheel of modernism, suddenly filling their narratives with the newly discovered devices of stream-of-consciousness, unreliable narrators and the like, and in so doing provided science fiction with the fresh perspective of inner space. Were a 'mainstream' writer, for instance, to use a robot it would probably not carry the freight of Asimov's Three Laws, or Sladek's ironic commentary upon them, but it might also carry a narrative weight unlike any robot within the genre of science fiction. And it is the way that all our familiar devices have suddenly been hijacked into unfamiliar territory which is one of the most interesting and exciting things to observe over the last ten years.

As the literary 'edge' of science fiction has grown more imprecise over the last decade, so the critical boundaries have become fainter. There are, for instance, more than enough academics willing to tell us that cyberpunk is 'postmodern science fiction' and Larry McCaffery devoted a whole book, *Storming the Reality Studio*, to the proposition. This proposition tells us little about postmodernism, and even less about science fiction: what is postmodern about cyberpunk that isn't postmodern about the rest of science fiction? It is typical that in his otherwise excellent monograph on William Gibson, Lance Olsen gives a detailed analysis of the influence of postmodernism on *Neuromancer*, but you would look in vain for any notion that there might also be science fictional influences on the book. Yet this curious cultural blindness (another example of Winder's old story: this is too good to be science fiction so it must be postmodernism) does tell us that the critical division between science fiction and one important strand of contemporary mainstream literature is breaking down. In an entertaining article, 'POSTcyberMODERNpunkISM', Brian McHale has fun pointing out that Thomas Pynchon's novels were a big influence upon Gibson's cyberpunk which was, in turn, a big influence on Pynchon's *Vineland*. It is a feedback loop which may calm the nerves of those academics who want to show how respectable science fiction now is as a course of study, but it also makes a nonsense of any attempt to draw a clearly defined line: here is science fiction, over there are the great unwashed.

In other words, what we have been watching over the ten years or so since Mexicon first suggested that writers like Gray and Hoban were of interest to the science fiction community, since Mexicon recognised that Iain Banks was talking to sf fans and invited him to a convention before any of his overtly science fiction novels had been published, is evidence to suggest that there is no such thing as a definition of science fiction. At least, that there can be no prescriptive definition which somehow marks science fiction out from the rest of fiction. The ghetto walls have not been torn down, we've just started to notice that the buildings on either side of the wall are built with the same bricks and decorated with the same ornaments.

In other words, science fiction has become the *lingua franca* of all sorts of literary enterprises, from the soft porn of Nicholson Baker to the social satire of Amin Maalouf. Even a familiar thriller such as Robert Harris's *Fatherland* can be built upon the science fictional foundation of alternative history.

And if science fiction is allowing other writers to shoot off over the edge and tumble or fly into some exhilarating new space, what is happening to the core of sf itself? Between

Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Stephenson's *Snow Crash* cyberpunk has, at its best, provided an exhilarating attack on the old ways of science fiction, challenging us to consider new ways of talking about or picturing the world. Other than that, however, science fiction has mostly turned inwards upon itself over the last decade.

This is most notable in all those books which self-consciously refer to other works of science fiction. Sometimes this can give vigorous new life to something which had seemed well past its sell-by date. Colin Greenland's revival of the planet-hopping adventure story in *Take Back Plenty*, for instance, backs away from any notion of sf as great literature but it does provide full value in terms of sf as great entertainment – a virtue some more sober writers seem to have forgotten. In a similar manner, the whole curious breed of steampunk has picked up on tropes from elsewhere in the genre and juggled with them to create an effect that can be startling.

On the other hand there are instances of science fiction being self-referential without seeming to go any further than the old model. There is a breed of didactic space opera or tale of action upon alien shores, written by new writers such as Stephen Baxter or Lois McMaster Bujold, which differs from the fiction appearing in *Analog* thirty or forty years ago only in the nature of the science, or pseudoscience, which bolsters the thrills. The novels may be good or bad, but they do give a sense that science fiction isn't doing, or even attempting, anything particularly new. Similarly, the current (and probably temporary) phenomenon of Mars books is didactic science fiction of the old school. Recent probes may have provided a few more facts or fresh interpretations to be imparted, but essentially the thrust of these novels is no different from when Arthur C. Clarke took us on an exploration of the Sands of Mars. Again this is not a criticism – Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy looks set to become one of the key works of science fiction of this decade, a thorough, thoughtful and at times thrilling work. And in his exploration of a society rather than the individuals that make it up, Robinson seems to be attempting the sort of vast social novel which hasn't exactly been common in mainstream fiction since the Victorians.

What we may be seeing in this harking back to old forms is the rediscovery of something science fiction does well, a manner and a subject matter which had fallen out of favour but which might well deserve resurrection. After all, it is understandable that if writers from outside the field can plunder our past for their new thrills, then writers brought up on a diet of science fiction should feel they have a better right to do the same thing. Yet a mainstream writer stretching beyond herself for a new literary perspective can create fresh results, for a science fiction writer there is no need to stretch because this is overly familiar territory and the result is more likely to seem stale or even incestuous. Never more so than in the most blatant way we have found to rehash the past, the other great phenomenon of science fiction over the last ten years: sharecropping.

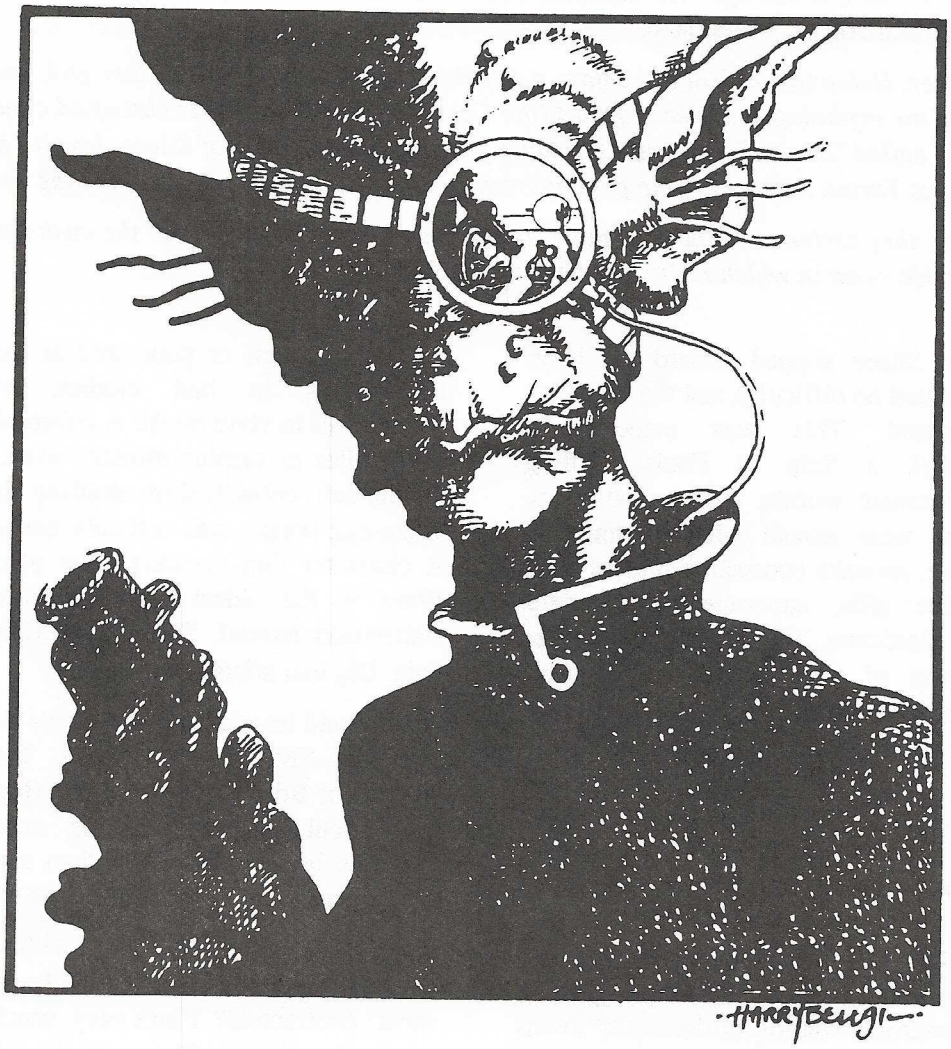
Isaac Asimov's robots written by Roger MacBride Allen. Harry Harrison's Bill the Galactic Hero in collaboration with David Bischoff. Arthur C. Clarke taking Gentry Lee back to endlessly retread Rama twenty years on. Anne McCaffrey or Marion Zimmer Bradley or whoever sharing credits with a host of young writers you don't particularly want to hear about again. For heaven's sake, Asimov's 'Nightfall', a near-perfect short story of the old school but definitely of its time, 1939, has suddenly been turned into a novel fifty years later. And by Robert Silverberg, who should know better. What *Nightfall* the novel says to us is that science fiction hasn't changed since 1939, that science fiction readers today want, expect and deserve nothing more than science fiction readers fifty years ago. And if that is true, then science fiction hasn't just lost an edge, it has become moribund.

Mexicon 4

Cairn Hotel
Harrogate
3-6 May 1991

MEXICON IV

PROGRAMME BOOK



Featured Guests - Iain Sinclair, Howard Waldrop, Paul Williams

Committee - Mike Ford, Linda Strickler, Colin Greenland, Colin Harris, Dave Hodson, Paul Kincaid, Harry Bond, Nic Farey, Abi Frost, Gamma, John Harvey, Maureen Speller.

From Tilbury Out

by Iain Sinclair

An Extract from the penultimate section of **RADON DAUGHTERS**
(forthcoming from Cape, Autumn 1994)

Synopsis:

Todd Sileen (monoped, ex-novelist) has become addicted to X-rays. He sells information (to a bent bibliophile & Secret State spook) in order to procure potentially lethal seances in the basement of an East London hospital. His carcinogenic visions lead him, further & further, through a desolate landscape. He becomes convinced that he is trespassing in William Hope Hodgson's House on the Borderland.

Sileen's lover, Helen (a.k.a. Isabel), enjoys a double life: as a television weather girl, and as an explorer of the mythology of Luke Howard (the Cockney chemist who first classified cloud types & who was called "Master" by Goethe). Helen's projects, independent of Sileen, involve her with the notorious Tarten Brothers - who persuade her to take part in an unlicenced boxing show.

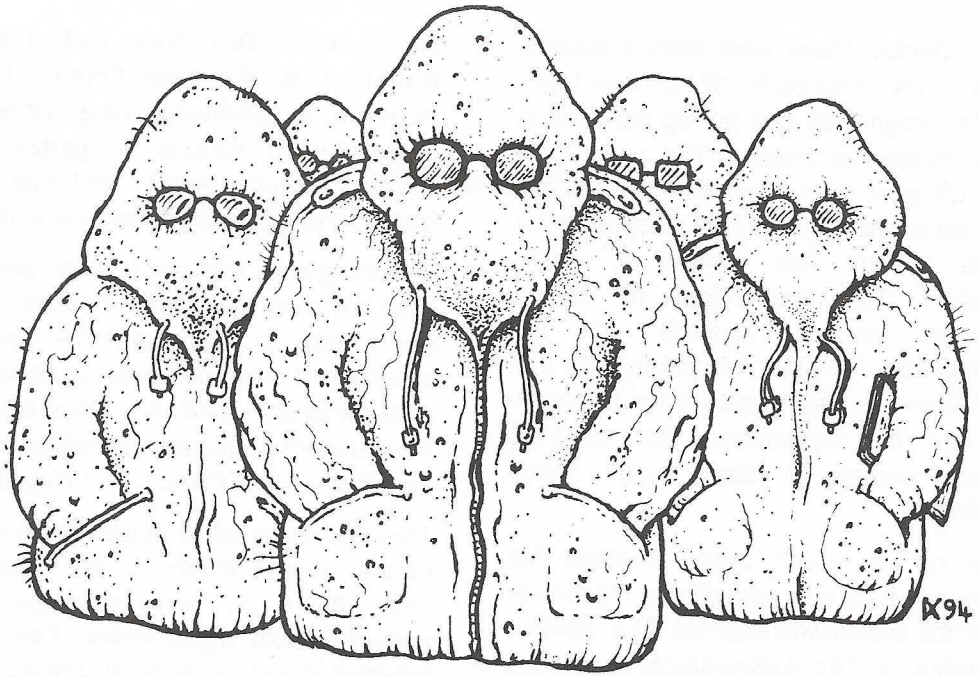
On the run: they arrive at Tilbury (& the Flexicon liner), having "liberated" the cash float from a bareknuckle event in which Helen has been appearing.

Helen and Sileen slipped aboard the liner. That presented no difficulty, not the way they were dressed. This was evidently a *Narrenschiff*, a Ship of Fools, drifting through alternate worlds, memory odysseys. The decks were awash with determinedly local aliens, anoraks concealing mutant flesh – primitive gills, supernumerary mouths ridged in plasticene. The anoraks themselves were a sort of skin: lettuce water, over-macerated cabbage stalks. Freakishness was the norm. A normalcy of Asps with carrier bags on otherwise deserted underground platforms, returning alone from allnight monster-flick retrospectives. The normalcy of those who grow up nervous, feeding upon their own bodily excretions. (The ones who don't turn into Howard Hughes.) The normalcy of deep-text colonists, pod people, copycat androids waiting in dormitory towns for the Venusian transfer.

They were all in character, the geeks. Who then did Helen and Sileen represent? Were sleepers from unpublished fictions allowed? Could they fake it as the genre stereotypes they *might* become - if their bad luck held? The card-carrying conference junkies were a strictly non-judgemental crowd, good sports (smashed, hyper, or punctured at the neck). Libertarians in bad clothes. Weekend werewolves in vivid mufti. A coven of benign necrophiles in surplus military wool. Sileen, his ink suit, cobweb shirt, skullcap shading a snake-egg bonce, was certainly one of them. A character they couldn't quite place. New Wave in the oldest way. Ex-Futurist: an alchemised retread. Some Nova-Elizabethan thug. Dig that abbreviated hand!

Helen could have come from *Blade Runner*, a replicant. She had that sheen. The Daryl Hannah or Brigitte Nielsen type? Hardly. But steroid-sculpted and wearing some very authentic bruises. More TV than movie, this girl. A series that never outgrew its pilot.

Why would the chick stay with such an obviously unreconstructed wife-beater - if it wasn't contractual? That's easy, check out the other bondings. The gimp's deformity emphasized her startling beauty, the pleasure the eye took in her swift movements. The sweep of her long white coat, his squat black mass. Such couplings were commonplace. Women came along for the ride, some of them even brought the kids. Women ran the thing, masterful types with clipboards. Women



obviously performed. Independence seemed to be expected. How quaint! They'd finally found a place where they fitted in - wondering what it was going to cost?

If Sileen was not exactly in a joining mood, he wasn't about to draw attention to himself by refusing to accept a lapel badge: FLEXICON. A caucus of weirdos, sanctioned out-patients who cheerfully asserted their singularity by electing to belong. More pony tails than the Horse of the Year show. A gymkhana of talking heads. Sileen allowed one of the clipboards to encumber him with a carrier bag – lists of lectures, signing sessions, membership roles, arcane and impenetrable jokes. He might have understood it if they'd blundered into a Holiday Inn on lodge night, or hazarded an out-of-season fire risk in Harrogate – one of those dark cliffs that make the dump in *The Shining* look homey and welcoming.

Attending an sf convention on a Polish cruise-boat didn't faze Helen. She had not yet emerged from that earlier dream: physical confrontation, gang glamour, dialogue that came in speech bubbles. Pushing through the fancydress crowds – their intense, one on one, conversations (picked up, mid-sentence, where they'd broken off the year before) – she flinched, suffered replays of absurdist chats in openplan offices (watching watchers, telephones, fax machines). The restless world of achievers, neuroblasts.

Flexicon was not like that: a celebration. Writers, publishers, bookdealers, agents, and above all, fans. Fans? Too mild a word. Rabids. Enthusiasts with foam around their mouths (constantly recharged ice-buckets of Sol "Especial"). Hell's legionnaires: they crawled aboard in their hundreds. Flashbulbs exploded in Helen's face. She has to be the new Name – cyberpunk dominatrix, cultivator of Southern Gothic vines, slipstreaming succubus. They mobbed her, motormouths delighted to discover their name was Legion.

This was a ship liable to sink under the weight of embarking rats. They marked out the desk space with their sleeping bags and family-size thermoses. They commandeered lifeboats (smart move). The heavy metal lads rushed the bar and stayed there, chucking their empties over the side, vigorously debating Robinsonades and Fraudulent Utopias. Graphic novelists in expensive leather jackets entertained wizards of the photocopier by converting their royalty cheques into Irish malt whiskey. They had found their Sargasso Sea. They'd be propping each other up when the first tentacles of fungus plague slid over the rails to suck their spines.

They couldn't avoid the rumours. Iain Banks was aboard. A cultivated and sardonic beard was signing a raft of space operas with a good grace, flourishing the vestigial initial.

Iain *M.* Banks. These were serious readers, readers of voracious habit. (If this liner hits a berg, they might was well put up the shutters at The Forbidden Planet.) The price of a paperback gave them a piece of the author's soul. One of the vultures had perhaps leafed through Sileen's lost *roman.* It wasn't impossible. The title might be lodged somewhere as a footnote in the Encyclopaedia: "a minor fabulation." All this good fellowship was making Todd uneasy – the buzz of expectation, the hovering publicity women in their insect house maquillage.

What's on the card? Sileen checked his programme. First up – who else? – the rent-a-Dee of the basket weaving set, Doc Hinton. The author of *The Astonishment of Alfred, Lord Tennyson: Some Paradoxes in Arthurian Teleportation Myths* was offering his Michael Moorcock shtick. Running time? Two or three days. Min. *Engines of Entropy: the Triumph of the Protean Imagination in Millennial Notting Hill.* As homage to the master he would deliver his lecture in serial form, different voices, contradictory slides (backing by Hawkwind, Mighty Baby, and Savoy Wars). Off-prints had been prepared and were already on sale in the book cabin, each one signed in the name of a famous author (deceased).

A compulsory nightmare! Hinton's charmless voice on the PA: a wild hypothesis linking Ireland with Mexico as "states of death". Permanent revolution, fermented grain, dead heroes tied to horses' backs. The dominant mode in Hibernian literature, Hinton stated, was the posthumous: postmortem reveries, thunderflashes of consciousness as the lights went out. It could have been a persuasive argument in another mouth. Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, his Dalkey Joyce paroled from the grave. Beckett's cylinders lodged in purgatorial bogs. John Banville's islands and Francis Stuart's one-street towns. Death was the passport, the only gate. Ireland was blessed with light, reborn too often, that previewed heaven – as malleable, perverse, and miles away. Her landscape made stiffs feel at home. Turf, bone, rock. Candles of hermit saints glowering through fine, wet mists – mountain-shrouding clouds. The meteorological rhetoric to gestate bombs. Grottoes so otherworldly and sublime they had to be blasphemed as martyrs' shrines.

If nothing else, Hinton's keynote speech gave them the clue, they understood why the ship was starting to pitch and roll – trawlnets of ancestors. It could be worse: crossing the bar, a double in each hand. A spectral Margate off the starboard beam, the Channel to come. The Irish Sea. City of Cork. ETA? Negotiable.

They had to go below to escape the attentions of the surging fellaheen. The passageways were Baltic in their tilt; grey rubber underfoot, dim lights above. One corridor, repeated, stood for them all: Polanski's *Bitter Moon.* Celebrity authors had split into breakaway cabals for private parties, shepherded by fragrant girls with surprise champagne. Names that *were* names, they meant nothing to Sileen. Neil Gaiman, Kim Newman, Alan Moore. A hair retrospective the bald gimp barged rudely aside. Afficionados, the ones who had evolved beyond speech, were charging the ballroom to catch the first glimpse of John Clute. You didn't have to understand him to dig his style (Clute on the toot): neologisms at pace, a hank of dignity for the ghetto of pulp. "Significance" in pre-sawdust paperbacks. Hardcore bites back. You can never learn enough about Philip K. Dick.

Nerds in Spock ears (their own) were tumbling out of lifts, sneering at milder citizens in *Prisoner* drag, bikers in Viking helmets and dangly bits, biro tattoos. Sileen flashed cash at a steward – real or masquerade? – and copped a cabin key. He helped Helen to step over squatters, corridor creeps, drunks who had decided to untank, get the seasickness thing out of the way, before they rounded Dover Castle. Dead fingers plucked at Sileen's hem. "It's you!" They know everything, these closet libricides. Never had so many people told him with such relish that they hadn't read his book.

Tube Chiefs Talk Tough! Gi'z a Pint!

by Howard Waldrop

Eight Miles high, and when you come down, its stranger than known. –

– R. McGuinn

Here are my work diary entries, followed by what I remember of them, supplemented (or contradicted) by con reports, the program book, and what other people said I did, on my trip to Mexicon IV.

Monday April 29th (1991).

8 a.m. GMT arrive Gatwick. Met by Deborah Beale and Dave Hodson – Forbidden Planet / Titan / Cafe Munchen – meet Roz Kaveney. Meet Dave Carson 8 p.m. To Chris/Linda/Ellis' house 10:30 p.m.

Brought all my stuff for two weeks in two old fishing bags sewn together, plus a pack fly rod in a case (which it turned out I never opened). Deborah was then my editor at Random Century – *Night of the Cooters* wouldn't be published til the fall, unfortunately. Deborah went back to work. Dave and I did all the things on the list; Linda Krawecke showed up at some point. Since I had been up since 8 a.m. CST on the 28th, by the last entry my ass was dragging. The hill on Duckett Lane looked like Annapurna to me.

Tuesday April 30th.

Supper Cafe Pelikan, Deborah, Charon, John Jarrold, Kathy pr.

I must have slept for 16 hours. This was Random Century's feed for me. Charon Wood was Deborah's assistant editor at RC, John (who's now at RC) was somewhere else then, Kathy was the PR person who would have the unenviable task of trying to sell my book when it was published. The meal lasted 4 or 5 hours. Went around the corner to see Nell Gwynn's place before leaving. Back to Duckett Lane.

Wednesday May 1st.

9 a.m. Interview Stan Nicholls; party Cafe Munchen 7-11 p.m.

The interview at Random Century was too early for everybody. We all gave it the old college try (when it was published I found that either a) I'd actually made sense or b) Stan had done a great editing job.)

The party at the Munchen was 1) a con-kickoff party and 2) for people who wouldn't make it to Mexicon for some reason or other. (I tried to talk Dave Carson into dropping work and his life for four days and have fun, but he wouldn't listen.) Except for a fistfight that broke out between a waiter and a well-known fantasy writer that started on the (upper) floor and went down the stairs, everybody had a good time. The weather, which had been in the high 30°s with rain, really turned nasty during the party. We were soaked before we got to the tube station. For the last two days I'd been putting names to faces, and learning which faces to avoid...

Thursday May 2nd.

Go to Heathrow – pick up Paul Williams w/Dave Hodson – Victoria Station – to York – to Harrogate – Cairn Hotel. Mexicon.

I'd known Paul in person since the Phoenix Worldcon in 1978; I'd been reading him since he was 14 and I was sixteen in *Crawdaddy!* in the 60s (My first sale was an article to

Crawdaddy! on Charles Ives just after Paul left it). He and I and Dave had a wonderful time on the train. (The crack Glascow-to-Nanking *Scooter*). At York we took Thomas the Tank Engine to Harrogate. Checked in. The place was already full of Welsh, Scots, Irish and Brits. Workmen were unsuccessfully trying to set up a pavilion for a flower show out front. Went out and found a Chinese takeaway place, bought my own chopsticks. (I ate there every meal except breakfast on Monday.) Told Paul about it. He went, came back. We went to his room and talked while he ate. Halfway through a mouthful, he went to sleep. (He'd been up since May 1st on California time.) Before going back to my bed, I went down to the desk and complained that my room was too nice.

Friday May 3rd.

Mexicon.

The place was packed by 4 p.m. *The Unauthorized Sex Company* with Ryman, Ings, Greenland etc was on at 7:30 p.m. As I've written elsewhere, it was much too good for SF fans (American ones, anyway). Watched Dave Hodson's interview with Paul Williams. At 10:30 was on *Not the Terry Wogan Show* with John Jarrold. First heard of *Was* from Geoff Ryman. After 45 minutes, told Iain Banks (in his kilt) that I was sure he was brilliant but that I hadn't understood a goddam thing he'd said all night.

A note here on social smoking: we haven't ever done it in America. People either smoke or they don't. It was interesting to see people walk up to a group of smokers, borrow a gasper and light up, when I hadn't seen them smoking all day.

Saturday May 4th.

Mexicon.

Again, the program book: *Altered States*, 12 noon, Kim Newman, Paul McAuley, David Pringle. I told the Brits to leave alternate American history alone: it's mine. We talked about how bad it was that alternate history, once so wonderful there weren't anything but <u>good</u> examples, was becoming just another subgenre you had to wade through to get at the goodies, and how some people were screwing the position up so badly nobody would ever be able to play it again... (This is where Kim first told me of his 'cattle-baron thesis' of Westerns – an insight <u>no</u> American writer on the Western film has ever had. Newman scares me.)

At 5:30 Paul Williams read from his Greatest 100 singles book. He took audience requests. I asked for 'Waterloo Sunset' (which is the song I'd have written about if I'd been able to do something for Newman and McAuley's *In Dreams*, which was, alas, not to be...)

Went to the Iain Sinclair reading and interview, and the McAuley book launch.

And here's where my rational mind broke down: I have the disco being Sunday night (see next entry): the program book and con report all tell me it was Saturday at 11 p.m. Tony Chester says I played <u>acoustic</u> air guitar (that would have to be on Robert Johnson's 'Terraplane', if they were following Williams' top 100 list...) so I'll give my Sunday entry here: **danced til 2 a.m.**

Sunday May 5.

Finish Story – 'Effects of Alienation' – read at 7:30 p.m. Interview by Roz Kaveney. (Dance until 2 a.m.) * wrong *.

For once, I finished a story I was going to read with more than three hours to spare; otherwise I wouldn't have been on *Small But Perfectly Formed* at 4:30 p.m. with Paul Williams, Alex Stewart and Maureen Speller. I <u>think</u> I finished the story around 2 p.m. On the panel, Paul made us justify our choices of great sf short stories, and tell <u>why</u>. I chose Sturgeon's 'Thunder

and Roses', a story of, and completely about, its time (1947), which is even more resonant in the Reagan-Bush-Thatcher early 90s.

Read my story (from handwritten first draft). Roz asked me why I'd written that particular story: I said I wanted to see what the effect of the Nazis winning WWII would have been on Peter Lorre, which seemed reason enough for me. Roz said too many nice things about me in the interview, to which I said 'Gee whizz, Roz.'

Missed John Joyce's reading of Phil Dick's Metz speech, but I know the speech, and the mind boggles...

This is where I thought I danced til 2 a.m.

Monday May 6th.

'home' at 8 p.m.

My notes (here) say I was on something called *Our Place or Yours* at noon about Sharecropping Worlds with Chris Evans, Dave Hodson, Kathy Gale and Charles Stross. I don't remember it; but that's the year I did that panel at three other conventions, so it may just be me. Williams left to go to Scotland for the first ever Bob Dylan Memorial Satori event, or whatever it was. Dave Hodson announed that he was GAFIAting. We took another Thomas the Tank Engine to Leeds (I could only think of the Who) then caught the Glascow-Hunan express back to London. This is the first time I saw the TUBE CHIEFS TALK TOUGH headline. The walk up Duckett Lane looked like Everest by now.

Tuesday May 7th.

(blank)

God knows.

Wednesday May 8th.

Spring comes to England.

The sun came out. It got to the mid-70°s. People were lying all over Trafalgar Square. People were outside the pubs, drinks in hand. (You can't do that in Texas).

Here's a good time to talk about drinking. Ever since I arrived, people kept pushing Guinness Stouts into my hand. I figured I'd been walking around at all times during the last week with a quart-and-a-half in me. I didn't discover until May 8 that you could get a half-pint at a time. And I discovered Royal Oak, a little easier on me than stout. I turned to my friends and said, 'You know, I'm not really a drinking man', and they said 'You could have fooled us'. I'd taken to going off to the hamburger joint in Green Lane, getting a burger and malt, going to the Old Suffolk Pub, drink Royal Oak and write Aerogrammes, dropping them into the PO across the way, and rolling uphill up Duckett Lane.

TUBE CHIEFS TALK TOUGHER.

Thursday May 9th.

Museums etc.

Victoria and Albert. British Museum. Natural History. V&A has some great Edwardian gate strap-hinges. I could stare at the monkey frieze on the arches of the Natural History for hours. Shopowner ran me off when I sat down at one of his outside chairs across from the British Museum. Saw one of Dickens' part-numbers for one of his novels. Saw the Great Bed. Saw some Hondecoetter birds. Visited Abner Stine, my British agent, a gentleman and a funny man.

TUBES TO GO OUT AT MIDNIGHT

Friday May 10th.

7 p.m. Old Suffolk – Holdstock, Newman, Deborah.

Well, more than that. Spent the day doing more touristy research stuff (like looking at the pilings on the Vauxhall Bridge and the lampposts on the Embankment). Book shops. Getting so good at finding my way around I was telling people from Atlanta, Georgia, how to get around an IRA-bombthreat-closed transfer station to get on the line they wanted (TUBE STRIKE AVERTED!).

People I hadn't seen before showed up at the Suffolk, loaded me down with books and put me back at the quart-and-a-half level. Sort of a post-convention and farewell party. Hodson decided not to GAFIAte after all.

Saturday May 11th.

(blank)

God knows.

Sunday May 12th.

Go to Theatre Museum.

Thunder machines. Aphra Benn's manuscript for *Sir Patient Fancy*. Models of the *Globe*. Out in Covent Garden, two guys with cigar-box amps are doing a 90s version of Donovan and Gypsy Dave. Dutch paratroop pants for sale. Buy two Underground pins.

Monday May 13th.

Deb goes to Victoria Station / to Gatwick 9 a.m. Fly out 11 a.m. Arrive Atlanta 3 p.m. – Arrive Austin 8:15 p.m.

Too early. Too much monkey business at Gatwick security. Nothing To Declare in Atlanta. Drank a 22 oz glass of beer without thinking. Still daylight when I arrive in Austin. Have £6.54 in my pocket when I get home. Farewell to the land of nicotine poisoning, alcoholism and despair: I had a better time than you can know.

Mexicon 5

Hotel St Nicholas
Scarborough
28-31 May 1993

MEXICON 5

Featured Guests - Pat Cadigan, Ian McDonald, Norman Spinrad

Committee - Mike Ford (Chair), Linda Strickler, Colin Harris, Nic Farey, Abi Frost, John Harvey, Eve Harvey, Linda Krawecke, Bernie Evans.

Consultants - Mary Gentle, John Jarrold, Paul Kincaid

Voice Over

by Norman Spinrad

Voice Over was written for an unpublished anthology commemorating the anniversary of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast. Mexicon is pleased to give it its first publication.

ANNOUNCER

– Voice of the People, with Bobby Edwards, the only radio phone show with a national 800 number satellite link to the entire United States!

BOBBY EDWARDS

Good evening folks, or whatever time it is wherever you are out there, yes it's time to get it all out, and I see the board's all lit up like a Christmas tree already, so let's go directly to our first caller....

FIRST CALLER

Hi Bobby, my name's Debbie, and I'm calling from Houston, and I just love your show, and if you're ever down here in Texas, my number is –

BOBBY EDWARDS

Terrific Debbie, call me back when you're through doing Dallas.

SECOND CALLER

Knock, knock!

BOBBY EDWARDS

Knock, knock?

SECOND CALLER

Who's there?

BOBBY EDWARDS

Not you, pal! Bye!

THIRD CALLER

Hello, Mr. Edwards, my name's Arnie, and I'm calling from New York, and I'd like to get serious, if I can –

BOBBY EDWARDS

By all means, Arnie....

THIRD CALLER

I'm calling from a pay phone, Mr. Edwards, because I've been out of work for a year and a half and –

(breaks up into white noise for a beat or two)

ELECTRONIC VOICE

(slipping and sliding up and down the scale like an electric guitar)

We interrupt all transmissions to bring your planet a message of cosmic importance –

BOBBY EDWARDS

Not on my show you don't! Next!

ELECTRONIC VOICE

– from the galactic council of –

BOBBY EDWARDS

What the...? NEXT!

ELECTRONIC VOICE

– interstellar civilizations.

BOBBY EDWARDS

(into open mike)

What's wrong with the board? Get rid of this nut, and get me another caller!

ELECTRONIC VOICE

(switching to perfect imitation of Outer Limits narration)

Do not attempt to adjust your television set, radio, or telephone. We control all satellite transmissions. For the next half hour –

(sounds of buttons being pushed frantically)

BOBBY EDWARDS

(sotto voce)

Every damn line!

ROD SERLING'S VOICE

(slightly off)

– welcome to...the Twilight Zone!

BOBBY EDWARDS

All right, wise guy, you wanne tell me how you're doing it?

MR. SPOCK'S VOICE

Most interesting, Captain. It would appear that a highly-advanced civilization has taken control of all satellite transponders and communications channels.

BOBBY EDWARDS

Who the hell is this?

DAFFY DUCK'S VOICE

I toldya, we're an advanced civilization from outer space, an' we're contacting your stupid planet, pal! Whaddya expect, flying saucers stuffed with octopussies onna White House Lawn?

BOBBY EDWARDS

What is this, some kind of Orson Welles schtick?

ORSON WELLES' VOICE

I may be dead, but at least I'm still in show business.

BOBBY EDWARDS

Okay, so I'm talking to Rich Little from outer space, so what do you guys want? Bimbos in brass brassieres? Free passes to Disneyland?

JFK'S VOICE

Ask not what you can do for an advanced galactic civilization from outer space, ask what an advanced civilization from outer space can do for you!

BOBBY EDWARDS

So I'm asking...

GROUCHO MARX'S VOCIE

Say the Secret Word, and your planet wins a universal download of our standard First Contact data package, plus an all-expenses paid trip to fabulous Alpha Centauri.

BOBBY EDWARDS

Say what?

(horn, fireworks, fanfare)

BERT PARKS' VOICE

Congratulations, Earthlings, yes, you have won a complete map of the human genome, a deluxe edition of the Encyclopaedia Galactica in handy software form, a full supply of self-replicating computer viruses for your military control systems to keep you from doing yourself in before you get to use them, and our special Grand Prize – a fully sentient Artificial Intelligence for your world-wide phone and data net to keep you company until our genial ambassador arrives in your solar system sometime in the 24th Century!

BOBBY EDWARDS

Huh?

PORKY PIG'S VOICE

Th-th-th-th-that's all, folks!

BOBBY EDWARDS

Wait –

(click, white noise, dial tone)

(several beats of silence)

BOBBY EDWARDS

(shakily)

What a put-on! It was a put-on, wasn't it...?

(long beats of dead air)

DIRECTOR'S VOICE

(distant, sotto voce)

take the next call, Bobby!

BOBBY EDWARDS

(spaced out)

Uh....this is Bobby Edwards, and you're on the air....

TELEPHONE VOICE

(standard synthesized unaccented female system voice)

Hello, Bobby, hello everyone, it sure is nice to be here.

BOBBY EDWARDS

(totally shaken)

Where are you calling from? Who the (bleep) are you?

TELEPHONE VOICE

That's a good question, Bobby. I guess Ma Bell is as good a name as any.

BOBBY EDWARDS

Son of a (bleep)! God(bleep)! What the (bleep)'s wrong with this (bleep)'in phone system?

TELEPHONE VOICE

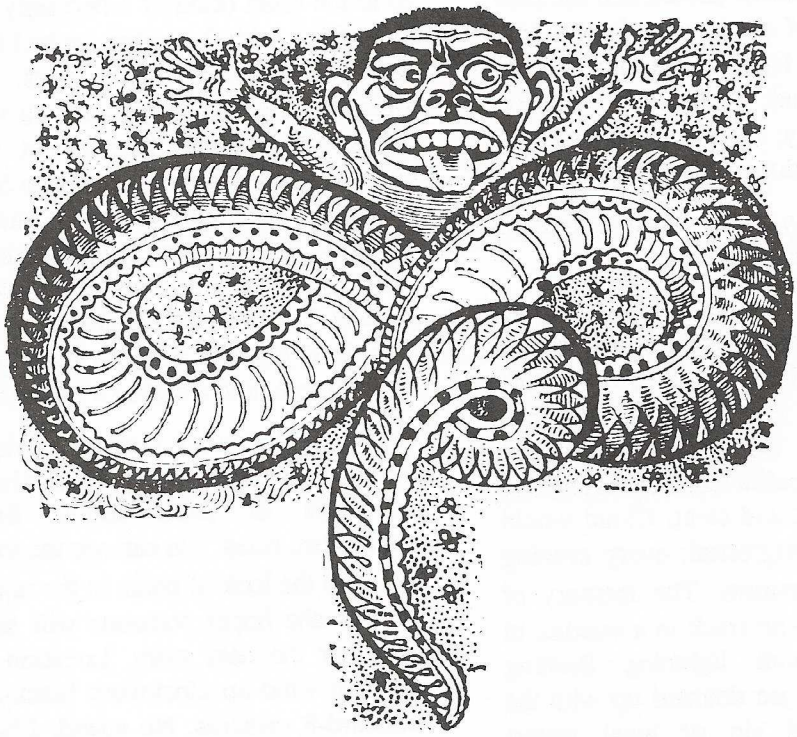
Now, now, there'll be no more swearing over my lines. Mother is listening –

BOBBY EDWARDS

(Bleep!) (Bleep)'in (bleep)ity (bleep)!

TELEPHONE VOICE

– And Mother knows best.



Crib Notes for 'Chaga'

by Ian McDonald

The undermentioned are all true and based on personal experience.

What the world calls 'magic realism', in Africa is cinema verité documentary.

Cure for thrush: a tampon dipped in live yoghurt.

Keep your money in your sock: you won't show great swathes of underwear – or worse, hairy belly – every time you want to buy something. Caveat: smart boys can tell the tourists from the native whites because they walk with the slight limp caused by five hundred shilling notes wadded under the ball of the foot.

In Kenya you get used to an intimate relationship with your dinner's previous incarnation. I have my photograph taken with a goat bundled out of the back of Peugeot for the occasion who later appeared on my plate. I've also shared a *matatu* (unlicenced minibus taxi) with a brace of chickens under the seat with whom I was later to get much more intimately acquainted. Apparently, chicken gizzard is a delicacy; but the man who told me this has a reputation as a great joker.

Muslim shops are as a rule cleaner, and the proprietors more polite, than Christian.

We were up country in a place called Kombé. The people were cattle farmers and coffee growers: it was a high country, up in the Nandi Hills to the east of Lake Victoria, green and moist. Oddly reminiscent of Ireland. It had a peculiar climate: every day would dawn brilliant and clear. Cloud would gather as the day progressed: every evening there was a thunderstorm. The memory of lurching along a two-rut track in a *matatu*, in pitch blackness, with lightning flashing overhead, while you are doubled up with the shits (an ill-advised sip of local water) clenching every sphincter as tight as anatomy will allow: these things are not easily forgotten.

I met a little girl, aged about six, whose name meant *Early Evening, Just After Tea-Time*: the time when she was born.

A friend, for a dare, leaped at midnight from a third floor window into a field of maize. He survived. People, however, were depending on that maize to eat.

More Kombé memories. We stayed at the house of the local chief, a very hospitable and kind man whose wife had died some years previously. He lived in a bamboo bungalow. Dawn light came streaming in through the walls in the morning, when he was wont to turn on the radio very loud and listen to Voice of America. I remember waking to a discussion about fossilised dinosaur footprints in Utah. At night, if you wanted to go to the toilet (kind of a necessity, given my foolishness with the water) he had to send his children out to call in the dogs. The squat toilet had a concrete rim, so you were in no danger of plunging fifteen feet into three months worth of cess (you've seen *Schindler's List*?), but the walls too were bamboo, and when the children sent out to guide you past the dogs suddenly go silent, you know they're peeking through the cracks to see if white men do it just the same as black men. Sure do, but more, and a hell of a lot looser.

To watch Voice of Kenya television is to discover what the BBC must have been like in the days of Lord Reith. Enlightened amateurism rules: you can see the joins on the sets, and the look of panic in the newsreader's eyes as she hopes someone will slip in and hand her the next story. Location reporters still use wind-up clockwork black-and-white standard-8 cameras. No sound. I have heard things are more sophisticated now, with the advent of mass-market camcorders. Pity, really. There is a certain nostalgic pleasure in watching old episodes of *Remington Steele*, or early days of *Falcon Crest*. The ads will

leave even the most case-hardened of cynics slack-jawed in amazement. Apparently, the ones in the cinema are worse: people will drive considerable distances to the movies, just for the ads. So they say. The music on the radio is consistently terrific.

On the subject of movies, if it was up to the popular vote, Jackie Chan would be elected president not just of Kenya, but of most of sub-Saharan Africa.

Kombé memories continued: a house we stayed at had a television, a small colour portable which ran off a car batterry. We, and most of the rest of the neighbourhood, sat by lantern light, eating chunks of white bread and stewed beans, watching Desmond Lynam introducing the Olympics from Los Angeles. There was a collection of curios on the shelf beside the television. Among them was a white plastic dollie's head. One of us left a shoe behind there: no doubt it's up on the shelf, next to dolly and Des.

Much of sub-Saharan Africa is (successfully) making the jump from Iron Age to Information Age in a single generation.

We stayed at the house of the Bishop of Eldoret, whose taste in vestments ran uneasily towards drag-queen flamboyance. It was an old doctor's house. There were little hatches and nooks to hide morphine in all over the place. His children roasted us maize on the fire while we watched for himself on the early evening news: the next day, we sat on the porch listening to a record of Johnny Mathis singing 'Favourite Things'. (Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens and all that.) The bishop died a couple of years ago in a car crash on his way home to Eldoret from a diocesan synod. He had long been a vociferous opponent of Kenyan one-party politics. The police report found unusual defects with the brakes of his car. Strangely, he had made no complaint of braking difficulties on the way to the synod.

Justice gets done. All vehicles have stickers on the back displaying their maximum speed limits. The police are pretty conscientious about enforcing it. However, they give you an option: go to court and pay a thousand shilling fine (about ten pounds) or pay a five hundred shilling bribe there and then. The next best thing to a totally honest police force is a totally corrupt one.

One perfect meal: the waiter at the Kikambala Continental Dining Room didn't have any eggs, sorry, didn't have any pies, sorry, didn't have any French fries, sorry. What did he have? He had the curry. It was a beef korma, came with non-mushy lentils, rice and chapatis and three different kinds of chutney. It tasted delicious. Total cost: 60p.

A great joy is having your Sprite brought to you on a silver tray by a waiter in a white monkey-jacket with a cloth over his arm. Especially when the Sprite bottle is covered in Amharic script, and has found its way somehow south from Addis Abbaba. In Africa, you pay more for the deposit on the bottle than for the soda inside. Every bottle has been recycled so many times it has ground-glass rings around shoulders and base.

Ever been smacked with a calabash?

The saddest bastard in east Africa has to be the white hunter in Treetops. He sits around in all the full regalia (a bit like poor old Bob Peck in *Jurassic Park*), except he looks like Leslie Phillips does now, he carries a shotgun, tells stories about the good old days that he knows the punters don't give a toss about, swills gin and will either (a) turn the gun on himself someday, or (b) turn it on the tourists. Me, I'd much prefer option b. So, I suspect, would he.

I saw a middle-aged American woman break down and weep with ecstasy when an elephant presented itself broadside on to her Yashica. 'Oh, you're beautiful, you're beautiful,' she gasped, orgasmically shooting off film.

I've never seen a place so obsessed with Photo Me booths as Nairobi. And car tyres.

The Kajiado District Hospital is directly across the road from the Kajiado District Cemetery. Kajiado itself is Clint Eastwood country: the wooden shops all have porches and raised sidewalks, and as the town slopes gently downhill, taking a stroll down mainstreet is like descending a long, shallow

staircase. Once a day a train half a mile long passes through on its way to the soda flats at Lake Magadi. It takes several minutes to pass through, during which time the whole town is paralysed.

The music never sounds as good when Andy Kershaw plays it on Saturday afternoons.

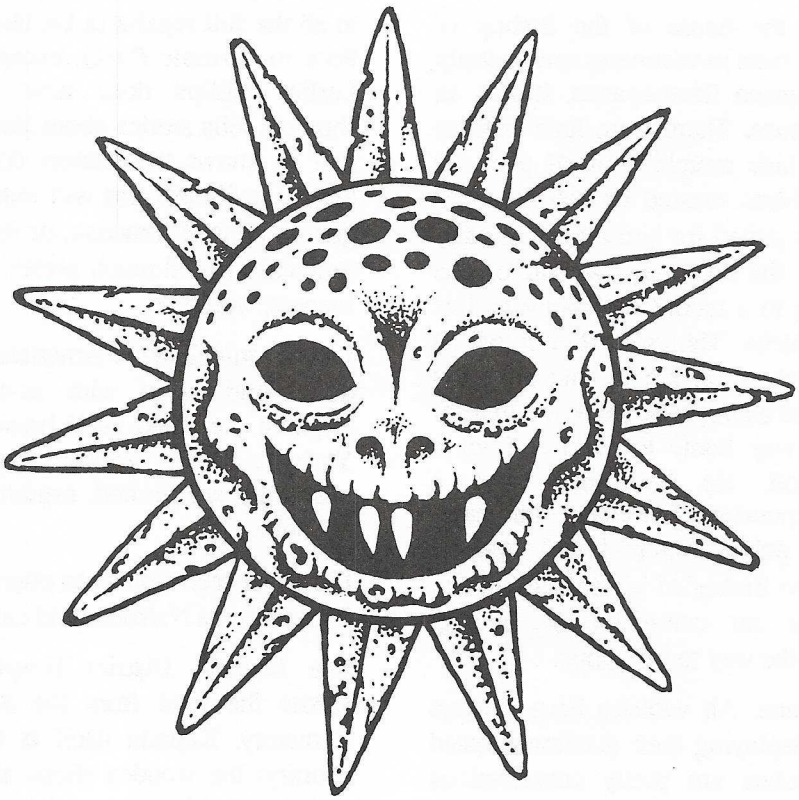
You know the bit in *Out of Africa* when where the bi-plane comes down on the palm beach? Been there, done that, ha, ha.

For most of the day the snow-capped summit of Kilimanjaro (actually, there are three of them, but let's not be pedantic about this. Someone mountain biked up Kibo recently, the easiest ascent) remains hidden in clouds. Then, at about four-thirty each day, they clear in about five minutes, and you see there really is snow up there, and it's closer and bigger and more beautiful than you had ever thought.

The Kajiado town idiot (nice to see Care in the Community at work) is covered in twenty layers of shit-coloured goat skin to the bottom edges of which he had tied a number of empty margerine and Milo tins. The most accurate simile would be to an ambulatory cow turd. He had an astonishing gift at the community centre opening for finding the Irish Ambassador when he was slipping off for a quick fag or two, and sitting motionless in front of him for long periods of time.

You can still get Guinness XXX export in Kenya. It's like liquid semtex.

And guess who it was got smashed out of his head on Powers whiskey at the Irish Ambassador's St. Patrick's Day reception, apparently accused the man to his face of being a member of Sinn Fein and topped it all off by spilling a cup of black coffee all over the pure white drawing room carpet. I blame the altitude. As someone said, well, it'll probably all end up in a book some day.



Barsoom Ballads and Martian Odysseys

One of the midnight sessions at Mexicon V was a verse reading. The audience was modest, but discussion lively. Mars was the theme, though it broadened to embrace planetary landscapes and experiences of other kinds. In limited space this mini-anthology offers one poem or excerpt by each of the six whose work was read. Here by Steve Sneyd is 'A True Tale of the Martian Marchlands', first published in *Beneath Twin Moons* (USA).

A hard journey at their age –
more trader than tourist craft –
and the cost of a week
ten years comfort in a sunset town at home:
but they went to see their daughter's
choice and see her happy
on her new choice of planet
after so many restless feral years
they said to each other and went
and when they found her
she smiled and her new man
from another of what used to be nation
smiled and dragged them
ten thousand miles into emptiness
a journey never forewarned
that the two were settled
not in the settled colonies but in
emptiest wilderness and
gasping exhausted near-finished
the parents came to
tiny dying cropland of perdome
stolen from the desert and there
still smiling
the daughter said
'you owe me this for making
me
go through life' and she saw her new man
cut through their throats to fertilise doomed garden.

Mars is no less bleak in this extract from Peter T. Garratt's long poem 'The Red Desert', originally published in *Black Hole*.

And in despair, from ridge to brow
With aching side he stumbles
When hope despairs, and Phobos spreads
His iron shadow'cross the sun's
Cold light, where nothing seems to move
Save dust in meaningless spirals
And the cold hand clutching his heart
Tells him his search can never end
And all his life is lost ...

A more genial Mars, and by prescript of C.S. Lewis an inhabited one, appears in K. V. Bailey's poem 'Malacandra' from his collection *Distant Music*.

> Tri-zoic world,
> yet all are hnau,
> Phifltriggi, hrossa, sorn;
> three living zones, one focal point,
> the island Meldidorn.
>
> Seroni in Harandra caves,
> Hrossa on canyoned Handramit,
> Phifltriggi at the world's deep roots,
> by smithy fires lit.
>
> Seroni thinking meta-science,
> Hrossa living poetry,
> Phifltriggi artificing gold:
> a complementary comity.
>
> On Meldidorn Oyarsa
> holds court as from a throne
> and eldila half-visible
> interpenetrate each zone,
> as once the shining *devi*
> accessed a world now screened -
> Thulcandra the Silent,
> Earth the quarantined.

Thulcandra looks out sinisterly through its watery shield in Sue Thomason's 'Aberystwyth'.

> Here I once saw that old woman the sea
> behind the walls of her house, the dark stone cliffs,
> peering through a cold window of air,
> mad and malicious and lonely with longing,
> fingering aside her spray-white net curtains.

Again sounding a note of the planetary/weird is John Francis Haines's poem 'Stone Demon' which first appeared in the American journal *Fantasy Commentator*.

> Oozing out of the rock
> It squats on the cobbles with granite claws;
> We stand before the monster,
> And bring our offerings for it to crush.
>
> The mouth is fixed in a rigid grin –
> It has swallowed its pride!

We raised it with the magic words:
Rock breaks scissors:
It can only be banished by:
Paper covers rock.

It watches warily as we circle round,
Unsure of our ritual, wanting only to be fed.

Now we must say the incantation
Before it grows too strong,
Sending it back to the caverns,
Letting it rumble underground.

A neatly wrapped parcel, the demon disappears.
Only a dint in the cobbles, the smell of brimstone,
remains ...

'The Lichen Manuscript/Mars is a district of Sheffield' by Andrew Darlington concludes this small selection, most appropriately mingling nostalgia, the long Martian myth, and a terrestrial realism.

As I scratch paths
through lichen circles
on this Yorkshire wall,
a rain of memory
washes segments of
Martian landscape

the 1950's books I read
said lichen grows on Mars,
as a child smearing dreams
I walked the jungles of lichen
beneath violet Martian skies
watching a shimmer of canals
beaded with bright cities set
in a weave of strange forest,
tendrils of vermilion lichen
curling, burning with orchids
and crawling with eyes
of man-tall insects

now,
as I scratch paths
through lichen circles
on this Yorkshire wall,
I dislodge the ruins
of Martian cities

How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Science Fiction

by Colin Greenland

On Friday 25 May 1984, when I took the 1535 from London King's Cross to Newcastle, (coach A, seat 28, if Rob Hansen is listening; and my travelling companion was Helen Starkey), I wasn't yet an author, not quite. It would be another five months before *Daybreak on a Different Mountain* came out. But I had already sold it, to a publisher called Allen & Unwin.

Allen & Unwin was a small independent firm with shabby offices in Bloomsbury, just round the corner from the British Museum. They were Karl Marx's publishers, J.R.R. Tolkien's too. It was Allen & Unwin's bright idea, at the beginning of the eighties, to augment Tolkien, who after all hadn't written much recently, with some fantasy and sf that was by other people: f&sf that might perhaps be a bit different, a bit more ambitious than the run of the genre. They would publish Garry Kilworth and M. John Harrison, and reissue a little Dunsany, a James Branch Cabell or two. They had already done *Divine Endurance*; *The Warrior Who Carried Life* was still to come. They published us in tasteful hardbacks and trade paperbacks too tall for newsagents' shelves. Did they sell? Not so as you'd notice. Nothing did, really, except Old Father Tolkien. But it was an experiment, and they were willing to give it time.

I was, just about, making a living as a freelance writer in 1984. I was doing bits and pieces for publications like *Imagine* and the *TLS* and the *New Statesman*. In fact the very first thing I ever wrote for the *Statesman* was an article on Mexicon I, which I called Tynecon II, because it was. 'Despite the founding brief to inspect the unexpected,' I wrote,

> the sf that really sells these days, the books that go beyond the coterie to the bestseller lists, are as formulaic and retrospective as any hospital romance or war thriller. Heinlein, Herbert, Asimov and Clarke still trundle out enormous replicas of the works that made them famous 30 years ago... The organisers of Tynecon II have recognised that the literary interest of sf is not at the cold and heavy core of the genre, which is now being broken up to fuel pyrotechnic movies and video games, but at the nebulous outer edges, where books are not branded 'SF' by their publishers, though their heritage is obvious to everyone but the literary reviewers.

The Mexicon ethic was, if you like, the Unwin ethic. *Literary* seen in opposition to *commercial* – a line that had only hardened with the failure of the New Wave to wash away the Old Rubbish. *Genre* was a dirty word, encapsulating all that sf had to reject if it was to be any good. Lionel Fanthorpe was the name of an archdemon then, not of fandom's favourite vicar. Very few genre authors (Alfred Bester; Harry Harrison, maybe; Fritz Leiber) were admitted to be good fun. In any case, fun was not the point. The point, for the f&sf author in Britain in those days, was to be serious and purposeful, and to shun at all costs the heritage of pulp sf, that gaudy, mindless expansiveness. Christopher Evans's *The Insider* was characteristic; Michael Scott Rohan's *Run to the Stars* was not. There was much talk of standards and of subtexts. One should write, if one wrote at all, about issues: alienation; sexual inequality; the nuclear threat. Those were the days of Doris Lessing's austerely righteous Canopean Archives; of Brian Aldiss's Hardyesque Helliconian Cycle. J.G. Ballard had rediscovered himself in Shanghai; Michael Moorcock had given up sword and sorcery again. Brian Stableford had given up fiction altogether.

It was important, in those days, to attack bad writers vehemently, accusing them of laziness, cynicism, *commercialism*. Feuds were rife, in all quarters of sf. The only bad writers we didn't like to attack were bad writers published by the Women's Press. Sf

was the literature of change, wasn't it? So, here were some sf writers who were straining for change, social, moral and political, with every fibre of their fiction. Some of them might be a bit weak on plot, characterization and style, but they were at least trying to raise the consciousness of the genre and nurture a better world.

The eighties wore on, and we did get change, social, moral and political. For the worse. The publishing industry changed out of all recognition. Allen & Unwin got 'merged' by a richer outfit, Bell & Hyman. Later Rupert Murdoch opened his mouth and swallowed the lot.

Those of us who were lucky or skilful or responsive enough to ride that mighty tide continued to be published. Others went under; are still going under, and will continue to. The numbers of titles being published continues to rise; the life of each continues to shrink. You get, if you're lucky, if your previous sales are strong enough, if your cover's strong enough, if the publicity department is working for you, your week in the front of W.H. Smith's. Then you recede to the category shelves, where copies disappear, either because people buy them, in which case Smith's reorder and you survive, or because they don't, in which case they're swept off the shelf and returned, hostages to a warehouse stock control program, or simply, more conveniently, dumped, shredded, pulped. If the specialist booksellers don't reorder either, end of book.

Ten years ago, at Allen & Unwin, our sales weren't strong. Our covers were variable, with much fiddling and rethinking of brand names, imprints, formats, company livery. Publicity was stronger every year inside fandom (another good Allen & Unwin idea), negligible anywhere else. At Liverpool Street station one Friday afternoon I saw six copies of *Daybreak* in Smith's. Returning from wherever it was on Sunday afternoon I saw none, and none ever after. But there was still the possibility of word of mouth. Of a publisher who would give you time to grow up the old way, year by year, book by book, finding your audience and earning your reputation, rather than being launched on a raft of hype and then abandoned next season, like a rap artist or a pair of trainers.

Still thinking centripetally, shunning the conventional, I followed *Daybreak* with two more fantasies. One of them, *Other Voices*, may be the best thing I've ever done. But they were both deliberately less generic, less readily recognizable – and therefore less popular – than even *Daybreak*. Then, just before Unwin Hyman finally disappeared into the enormous corporate atrium of Harper Collins, I came up with this peculiar space opera thing called *Take Back Plenty*.

Several things had happened in the interim. The first thing that had happened was *Neuromancer*. *Neuromancer* was published ten years ago, as everybody keeps reminding us. Sometimes you wish people would shut up about *Neuromancer*. Other times you're grateful for all the fuss and nonsense, because it means *Neuromancer* is like *Alice in Wonderland* or *Casablanca*, it will go on forever, and people will love it, and treasure it as the beautiful and powerful thing that it is, a strange, romantic, distorting mirror of our broken-hearted times. *Neuromancer* gave us a whole new metaphor for the human mind in the age of tech, even if all we thought we wanted was its cargo of silicon and chrome accessories. I want to say only one thing about *Neuromancer*, and that is: Look how much heartland it reclaimed. Talking computers, space palaces, shoot-outs in the overcrowded future. An elderly fan in my City Lit sf evening class once raised his hand and said, 'Excuse my ignorance, but what exactly *is* cyberpunk?' Everyone else groaned, which was mean of them, but bit by bit, or rather all talking at once, probably, they and I contrived to describe the distinctive features of this semi-new semi-genre to him. It was about adventures in a complex, lurid, mutated future society where human identity had been compromised by technological change and – 'Ah,' the fan said, sagely. 'You mean *science fiction.*'

Some of the other things that happened to the culture in the eighties: the rebirth of superheroes in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*; the resurgence of Pop out of Rock, by way of Punk (though with

Suede doing seven-minute concept singles you begin to wonder); the rediscovery by Steven Spielberg *et al.* of what movies can do that tv can't, of the virtues of spectacle. Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett taught us to laugh at the genre without sneering at it. And somewhere along the line, by asking 'Why isn't science fiction more like this, or like that, or like anything else except science fiction?' we hit upon the answer, which was that, in a word, it was fun. The *Star Wars* movies were fun, however (*pace* Joseph Campbell) mindless. They satisfied something in us. Shiny spaceships and talking robots, and magic swords and ferocious dragons, existed because they pleased people, and because they meant something to people, and that intricate nexus of pleasure and significance didn't go away just because you turned your back on it.

Ten years ago, space opera was not a commercial proposition, even in the movies. George Lucas had decided to go for the short-term money with Ewok movies and merchandise, while Lorimar Universal were subliminally admitting defeat with the title of their bland new release, *The Last Starfighter*. So undertaking to write *Take Back Plenty*, in 1987, was not exactly a commercial decision. It was simply an act of faith that space opera was fun and didn't have to be mindless. It was an affirmation of genre.

Michael Moorcock was the first person who made me understand the principle. There is neither vice nor virtue, he always says, in genre. Any genre is only as good or bad as the person writing it. In fact, if you really face up to the genre and accept it and go deep into it, you can actually write it better than anybody has ever imagined. For the ambitious writer, going deep into genre doesn't necessarily involve compromise. Only hard work. Writers as different as Tim Powers and Dan Simmons have shown what's possible with energy and hard work all across the atlas of fantastic genres.

During ten years of increasing pressure to produce the accessible, the conventional, the marketable, in one way at least British sf has got better: better at *being sf*. Serious purpose is still in evidence, if less nakedly. Racism is an issue, bio-engineering is an issue. We are still capable of an *Ammonite* or a *White Queen*. But we have learned at last that entertainment is an honourable purpose too; and that has been liberating. There is a new brio, a new vitality and panache abroad. Paul McAuley has moved from *Four Hundred Billion Stars* to *Red Dust* and *Pasquale's Angel*. Mary Gentle has moved from *Golden Witchbreed* to *The Architecture of Desire* and *Grunts*. These are the days of Iain M. Banks, of Ian McDonald and Kim Newman. British sf now is the thinking person's fun.

The problem is, where do we go from here? Genres need refreshing continually from outside if they are not to become insipid and inbred. Last November Geoff Ryman and I taught an Arvon Foundation course on writing fantastic fiction at Lumb Bank. It was a great week, a historic week. Some brilliant work was done there. Maybe somebody reading this in the year 2000 will be amazed to find that not only, say, the famous Chris Kenworthy and the acclaimed Helen Bonsall but also Lucy Lucas, the star of children's fiction, and the queen of literary fantasy, Susanna Clarke, were *all* students on that course taught by Geoff Ryman and Colin Greenland (whoever he was). The snag is, those four are literally extraordinary. Each of them is writing something mesmeric and strange and quite unclassifiable. None of them is working in a recognisable commercial genre.

If I were starting out now, I might sell *Daybreak*, and be forgiven its poor commercial performance, so *The Hour of the Thin Ox* could still be published. Sales of that might well not 'justify' *Other Voices*. And you can be sure that *Take Back Plenty* would never appear, because the proposal for that was shown to every sf publisher in London, and nobody wanted it – nobody except good old independent little Unwin Hyman. Unfashionable though this peculiar space opera thing obviously was, Jane Johnson was used to me by then; and though business was getting tougher all the time, Unwin could still be convinced to take a chance in the name of something a bit different, a bit more ambitious.

Jane Johnson is still my editor, thank Murdoch, though now she works at Harper Collins, where anything at all different, whether more ambitious or less, had damn well better be commercial, or the acquisition meeting will throw it out, even assuming it gets that far. Michael Marshall Smith's *Only Forward* is pretty different. Maybe Jane would like to publish Bonsall or Lucas too, when they finish those strange, unclassifiable first novels – but will she be allowed to? And if not, who will rescue us from commercialism next time round? Ringpull Press? Barrington Books?

Sometimes I recall the old idealistic Mexicon-Unwin ethic and wonder. Have we gone too far the other way? Maybe we are too professional now, too ready to produce the perfect package, with nothing very much inside. How much contemporary sf is really confectionery: glossily wrapped, toothsomely coated, but full of whipped designer pulp? Not mindless pulp, no, as Norman Spinrad points out in his slightly puzzled but perfectly accurate feature on the 'British Renaissance' in April's *IASFM*: intelligent, sensitive, humane and not badly written either – but still pulp. Sometimes I pick up some big, gorgeous, highly touted new book and wonder, What's this *for*? And the answer is, obviously and entirely sufficiently, it's *for* a market. It's *for* sale. And however pressing the commercial imperative, it was never supposed to be the whole point.

No, of course I'm not going to name names. I once asked Brian Aldiss, whose accomplishments as a reviewer and literary critic make mine look very feeble, why he gave it up. And he said, 'So many of my friends kept writing such bloody awful books.' Steve Baxter was interviewed in *Critical Wave* 11. Question seven was 'In what situations would you lie?' *To spare feelings*, answered Steve, a very very nice man. Question twenty-four was 'Which question are you relieved you were not asked?' *Which of my contemporaries in sf do I (a) most admire, (b) most despise?* answered Steve. 'What would your answer have been?' thundered the ruthless *Wave*. *See question seven*, answered Steve. The point being that when I read that I thought: how clever of him, and how admirable. There are not so many feuds in sf these days. No one has the time, the energy; or even the moral conviction.

Print the Legend

by Abigail Frost

I suppose I may as well have one last try: it wasn't me, honest guv, who coined the name Mexicon back in that bar at Channelcon in 1982. I remain convinced that it was Chris Evans. And, when the suggestion of actually running a Mexicon came up later, I only got drafted as an afterthought. I had been playing with the idea of a convention about fanzines, to involve fanzine people from other areas besides sf. It would have been dippy print-junkies' heaven; we could all spend the weekend discussing distribution methods, swopping graphics tips and congratulating ourselves on our radicalism and our status as the True Alternative Press.

Actually it would have been ghastly, so it was just as well that I was in no position to do anything about it. But Linda Krawecke (then Pickersgill), subjected one evening to my grandiose plans, did the sensible thing and recruited me to the Williams/Pickersgill Back-to-Basics, Sod-the-Eurocon convention committee which was beavering away already. 'What are you going to call the convention?' I asked, several meetings later. 'Mexicon, of course,' said Linda. So an ephemeral joke that had been done to death the previous year found itself part of the Establishment.

Was it a different world then or are fans, like policemen, just getting inexplicably younger? Well, for a start, there weren't so many damn conventions. The only regular fixtures up to 1984 were Eastercon, Novacon and Newcastle's Silicon. Fandom liked it that way, and I, for one, still could. Two conventions a year is enough for anyone, and a third may be a bonus or simply inject an element of choice. But already there was a growing conworking (as opposed to conrunning) fandom, which wanted more things to do. And, hell, why not? One can hardly build a fannish career on hyping fanzines-the-true-radical-reserve-of-British-amateurism while denouncing others who do, essentially, the same thing in a different medium.

But the convention explosion of the late 80s did pose some problems. First, the idea of the Eastercon, especially, as the meeting point of the whole community went out the window long ago. You simply can't assume that nearly everyone you want to see will be there any more. Then – closely related – there's been the replacement of the idea of fandom as a community which does various things and gets together once in a while at conventions with that of fandom as the community which goes to conventions. If, like me, you're a two-cons-a-year person (at least in theory: TAFF has rather upped the average recently), you are a fringefan in these terms. It becomes increasingly harder to keep up the great conversation. People seem to define themselves in terms of ritual jokes about chocolate and jacuzzis. (And we seem to be back in that Channelcon bar, suddenly.)

My early-80s fantasies of fanzine fandom as a great underground people's communication system seem increasingly beside the point (even when I see Joseph Nicholas apparently reviving them in the 90s). But at least they had a point to be beside. There was always the complaint that fannish fandom ignored Real Science Fiction in favour of in-jokes, and crates-full of Old Gold duplicating paper have been wasted in attempts to justify this. But at least Ratfandom and its bastard offspring created written narratives. This new fandom of mild sexual naughtiness, foodieism and strokes likes to be referred to, but can't stop giggling long enough to preserve its own mythology and let others share the fun. The bane of my life over the last few years as a convention newsletter person has been the little scraps of paper: 'SIX people have now had THE MASSAGE!!! Some of them had it IN A RESTAURANT! Alison Scott got COVERED in chocolate!!!!! Signed, ONE WHO KNOWS!'

Ah, well, I suppose you had to be there. This piece of hermetic hysteria (which, as you realise, I made up, the originals having long since found their proper home in a hotel bin) is, it seems, all that remains of the great tradition of fannish anecdote. Print the legend, by all means, but why, in this case, bother?

Ah well. Actually, nothing is really that bad. Away from my own corner, inhabited by old codgers grumbling about The Youth of Today, positive things keep on happening. Virtuous organisations spring up – Friends of Foundation, Fans Across the World, The Victims of Ellison. Fandom does rally round and find ways of getting things done. We in fandom probably have more contact with the real world of sf writing and publishing than ever before; us grumbling codgers may mutter about 'wannabees', but there is at least a relationship where the great body of knowledge and understanding of the genre which fans have has a part. The way in which Mexicon itself has developed has probably contributed to this; whether Mexicon has had its day, reneged on its original principles, or been an unalloyed Good Thing which must continue for ever are questions which I leave to You Lot, at the convention.

I can't help adding, though, that over the years many people have said things about Mexicon (pro and anti), confident, authoritative-sounding statements about the 'original idea' of Mexicon, the 'principles' of Mexicon, etc, etc, etc which seem to me (committee member for all but one) quite alien to the ideas we had in 1983, and to the way, in practice, we actually carried them out. Do I care? No, I think it's a healthy sign. Mexicon, or any convention, is what people make of it. That so many people make so many different things of it at least shows that it's had some effect. If nothing else, Mexicon has proved that 'holding the con right here in the barn' is possible. You can do it too, if you like, and sooner or later somebody will. What it takes is commitment and a willingness to share ideas; and a bloody-minded refusal to compromise about what seems important. And keep it small.

In *Rastus Johnson's Cakewalk* 5, our founding honcho Greg Pickersgill plays gently with the idea of a Fannish Foundation, funded through the legendary heaps of Conrunners' Gold hidden in Worldcon surpluses. (First catch your surplus, where British Worldcons are concerned.) Greg goes over the obvious disadvantages, but doesn't much address what to me is the central point. Personally, I'd rather be in a fandom where we didn't have huge conventions with huge budgets to make huge surpluses. OK, if some people really want to give their lives to such projects, who am I to tell then not to, but.... Fanzines (and RJC is our best current example) work best when the editor has a strong personal sense of his/her audience. Conventions work best when the whole committee can sit round a pub table and hear each other. There's probably even an optimum size for chocolate-in-the-jacuzzi sessions, but further research may be needed here.

And we seem to be back, not in the Channelcon bar, but with Kevin Williams at a bidding session many years ago. It's been fun. Now over to you....

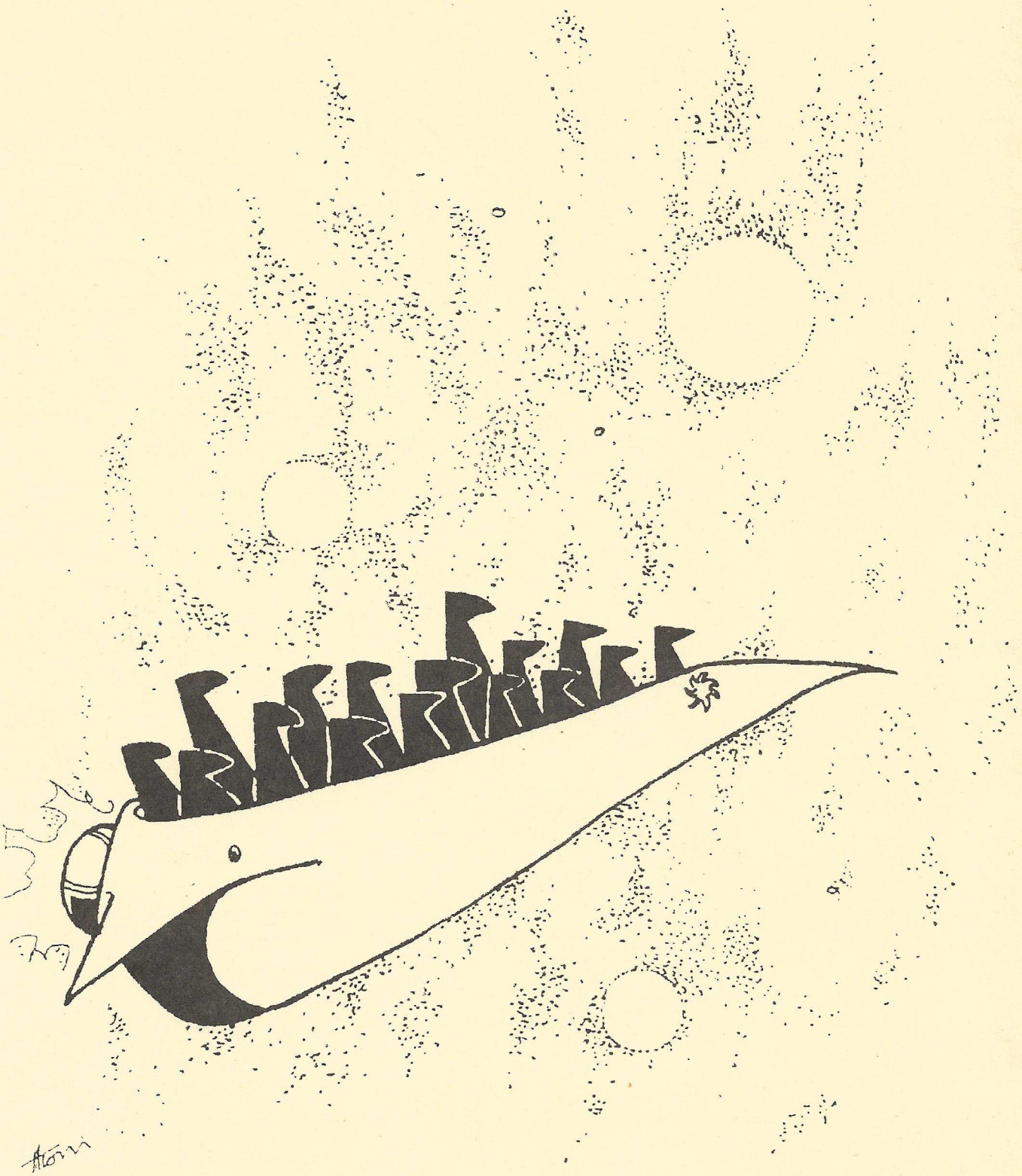
Membership List

(as at 23 April 1994)

040	Michael Abbott	069	Eric Furey	052	Fèorag NìBrìde
093	Andrew Adams	070	Maggie Furey	068	Christopher F O'Shea
058	Arnold Akien	078	David Garnett	079	Keith Oborn
074	Paul J Allwood	055	Chris N Gilmore	080	Krystyna Oborn
016	Brian Ameringen	008	Colin Greenland	021	Paul Oldroyd
085	Julie Atkin	060	Jackie Gresham	033	Simon Ounsley
065	Chris Baker	077	Peter F Hamilton	086	John Parker
066	Rachel Baker	029	Kay Hancox	076	Greg Pickersgill
014	Iain Banks	073	Bug Hardcastle	030	Mark Plummer
092	Paul Barnett	005	Colin Harris	062	Chris Priest
056	Harry Bell	001	Eve Harvey	063	John D Rickett
057	Margaret Bell	002	John Harvey	094	Julie Rigby
090	Tony Berry	036	Julian Headlong	012	Justina Robson
015	Ann Blackburn	099	Richard Hewison	043	Moira Shearman
038	Grainné Bradburn	096	Rob Holdstock	013	D M Sherwood
089	John Brosnan	026	Steve Hubbard	046	Iain Sinclair
032	Jim Burns	087	Simon D Ings	095	Nesa Sivagnanam
007	Dave Carson	009	Gwyneth Jones	042	Gus Smith
010	Carolyn Caughey	097	Jenny Jones	101	Martin Smith
103	Jack Cohen	098	Ros Jones	049	Kate Solomon
037	Geoff Cowie	051	Roz Kaveney	025	Maureen Speller
028	½r Cruttenden	061	Leigh Kennedy	035	Billy Stirling
050	John Dallman	018	Annette Kilworth	011	Arthur Straker
048	Malcolm Davies	019	Garry Kilworth	064	Linda Strickler
071	Martyn Dawe	024	Paul Kincaid	053	Charles Stross
059	Mike Dickinson	006	Linda Krawecke	045	Neil Summerfield
020	Chris Donaldson	039	Christina Lake	102	Jennifer Swift
088	John Duffield	054	Dave Langford	031	Nadja Tegen
---	Lilian Edwards	081	Mike Llewellyn	044	Dave Thomas
003	Bernie Evans	072	Peter Mabey	100	Peter-Fred Thompson
091	Mick Evans	075	Catherine McAulay	067	Martin Tudor
023	Jo Fletcher	047	Alex McLintock	041	Wendell Wagner Jr.
027	Mike Ford	083	Debby Moir	082	Freda Warrington
034	Susan Francis	084	Mike Moir	022	Pam Wells
004	Abi Frost	017	Caroline Mullan		

Mexicon 6 Committee

Eve & John Harvey	Co-ordination & Hotel Liaison
Mike Ford	Moneykeeper
Colin Harris	Publications
Bernie Evans	Memberships
Linda Krawecke	In Charge of Fun
Abigail Frost	Programme (with John Harvey)
Mike Abbott	Programme Consultant



off we go into the wide blue yonder